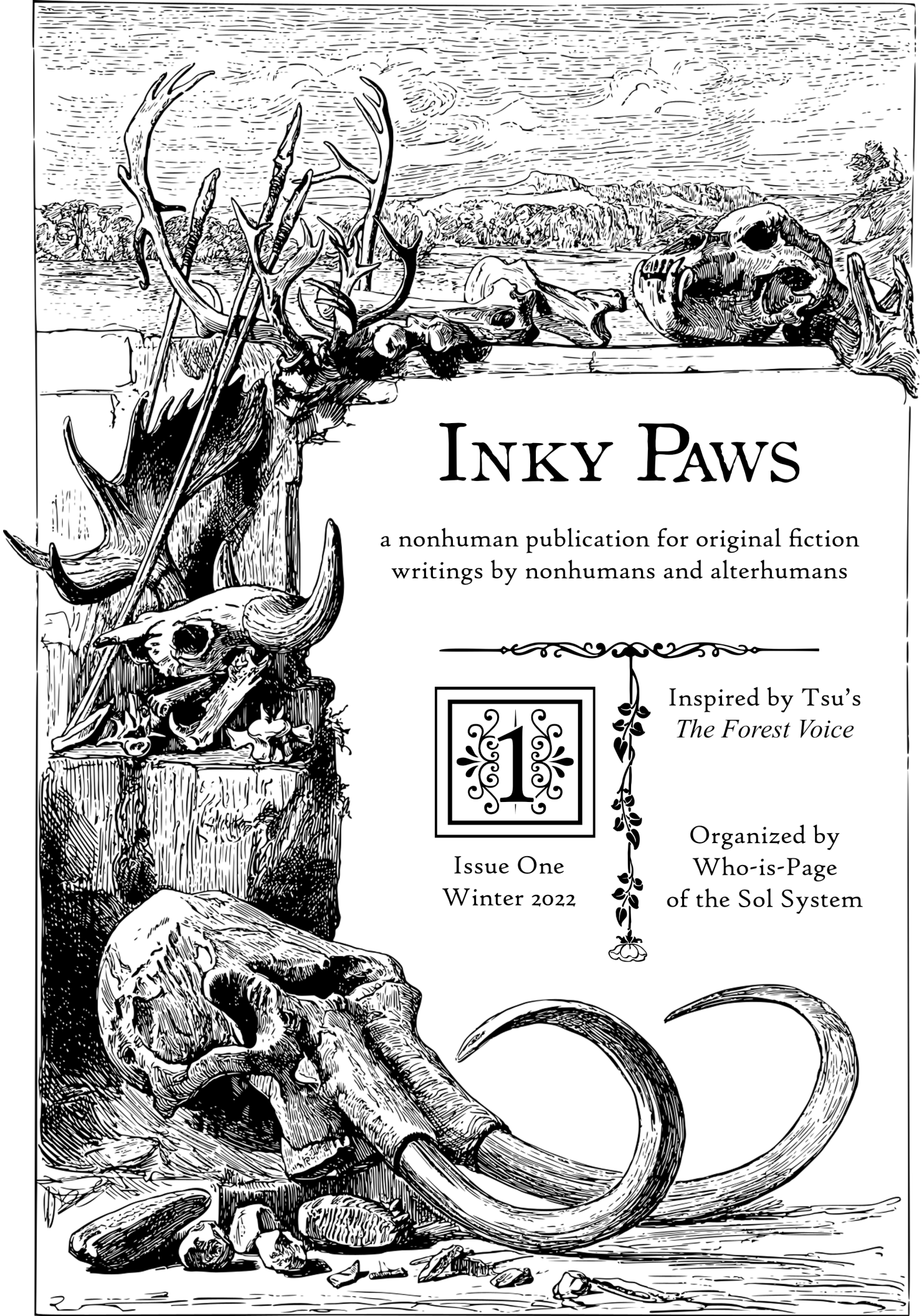


Inky Paws

a nonhuman publication for original fiction writings by nonhumans and alterhumans

1

Issue One
Winter 2022

Inspired by Tsu's
The Forest Voice

Organized by
Who-is-Page
of the Sol System

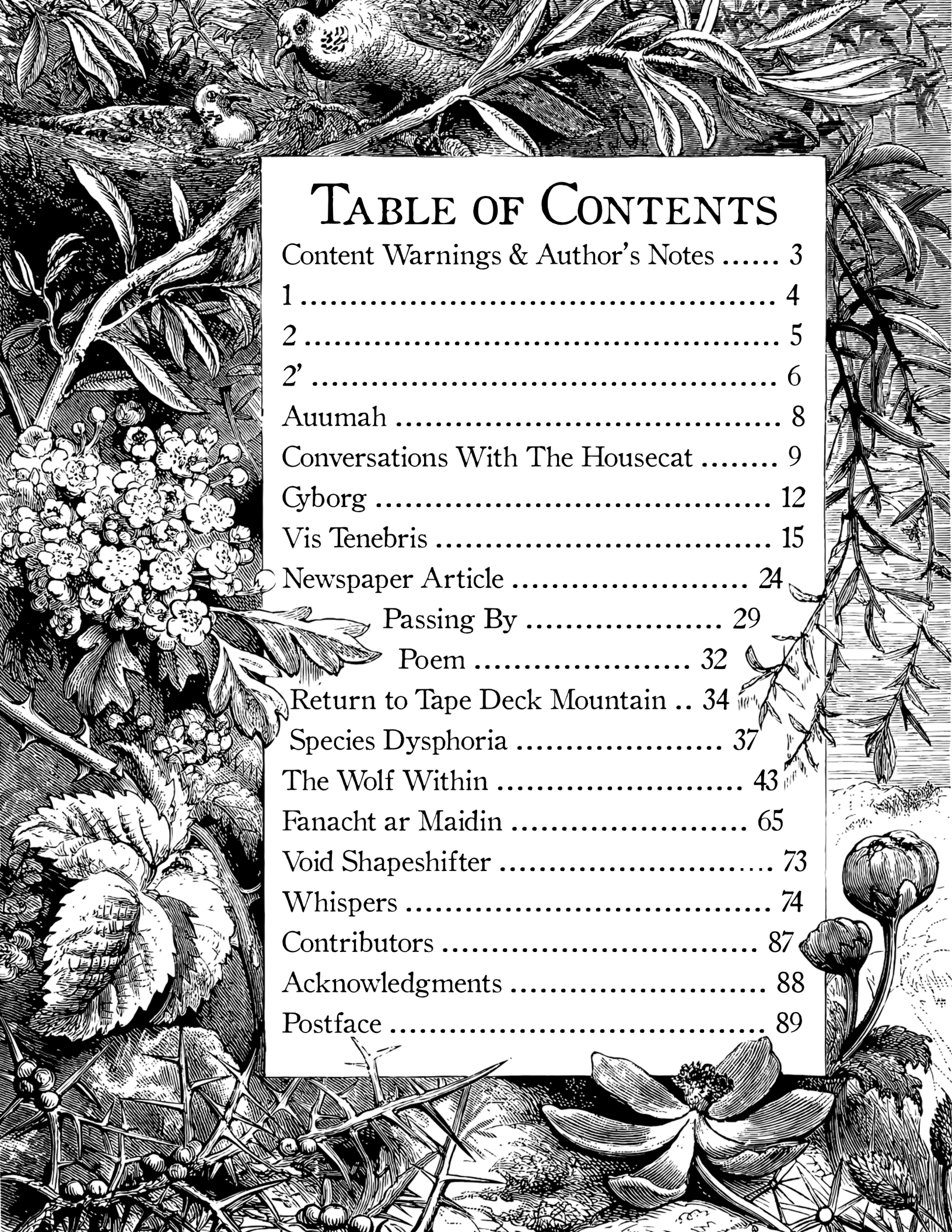


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Content Warnings

Cyborg (pg. 12-14)
Content warnings for: Dysphoria, Self-hatred, and Transformation.

Whispers (pg. 74-86)
Content warnings for: Animal attack, Death, Homophobia, Parental abuse, Transformation, Transphobia, and Violence.

Author Notes

Auumah (pg. 8)
I grapple with feelings of mismatch in my senses, and an intense hiraeth for unity. Auumah is my species' word for essence or soul. It is inherent in all things, and eventually rejoins itself to be reborn anew.

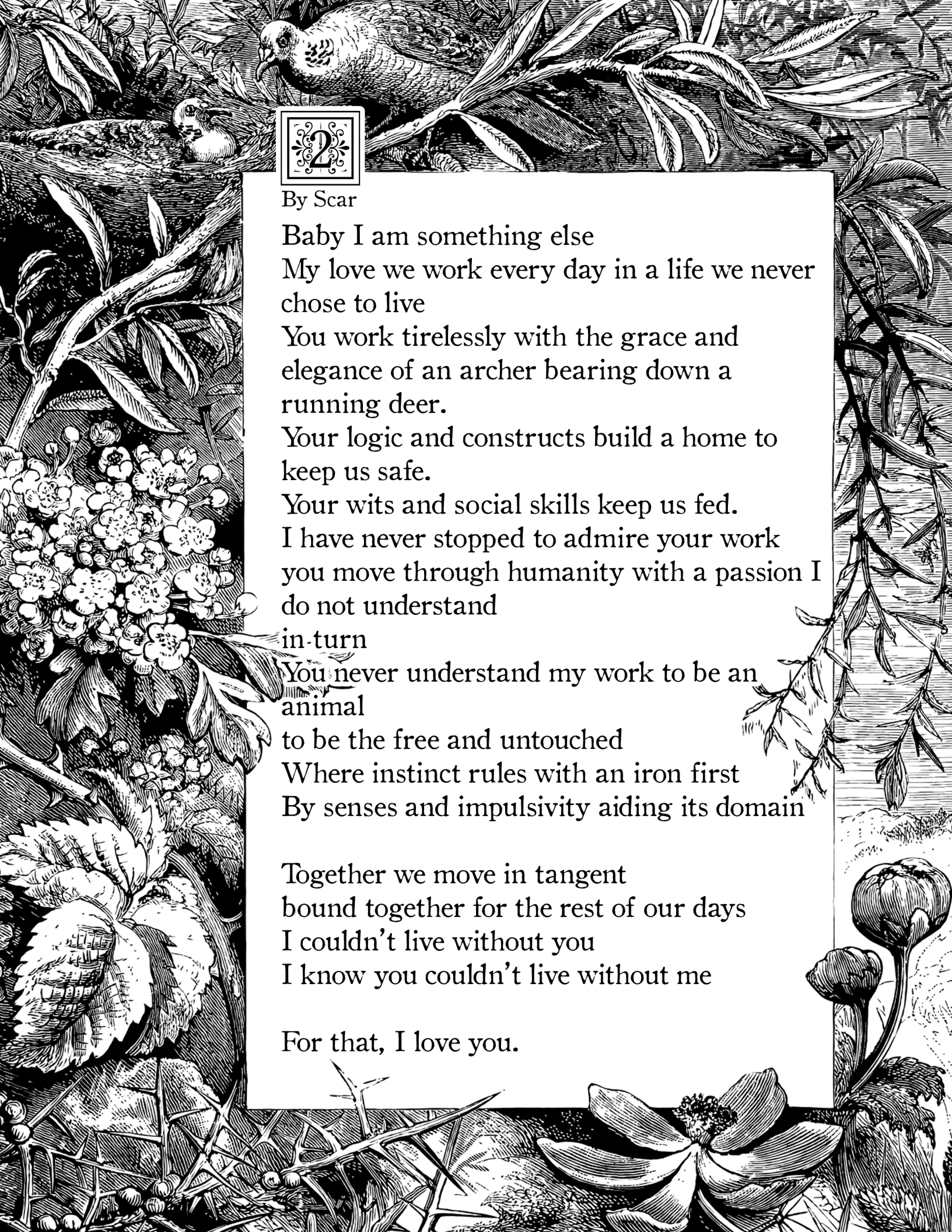
Return to Tape Deck Mountain (pg. 34-36)
This song was written when I was feeling pretty dysphoric (as most of my songs are) and calls back to the times I was experiencing species dysphoria before knowing what it was. That ate away at me as a young animal and I'm very glad that I've come to understand it and how it's shaped me into who I am now.



By Scar

I could hear everything from a distance again
The pounding earth under my feet like a heartbeat
Where we stand within ourselves never rests
Like the tide always changing so is my soul and body
I am shifting under the moon light again to something gamy and raw
I can feel the wild in me snapping its teeth into my ribs
For a moment in the cool air
I am free
For a moment I am the embrace of animal and human
And I forget what the taste of asphalt is like
Letting go of words and structures
Looking forward to the trees, skies, and to the rushing rivers
The wild is inside me alive and well
its vigor always present even when it withdraws itself

And to you the wild I love you



2

By Scar

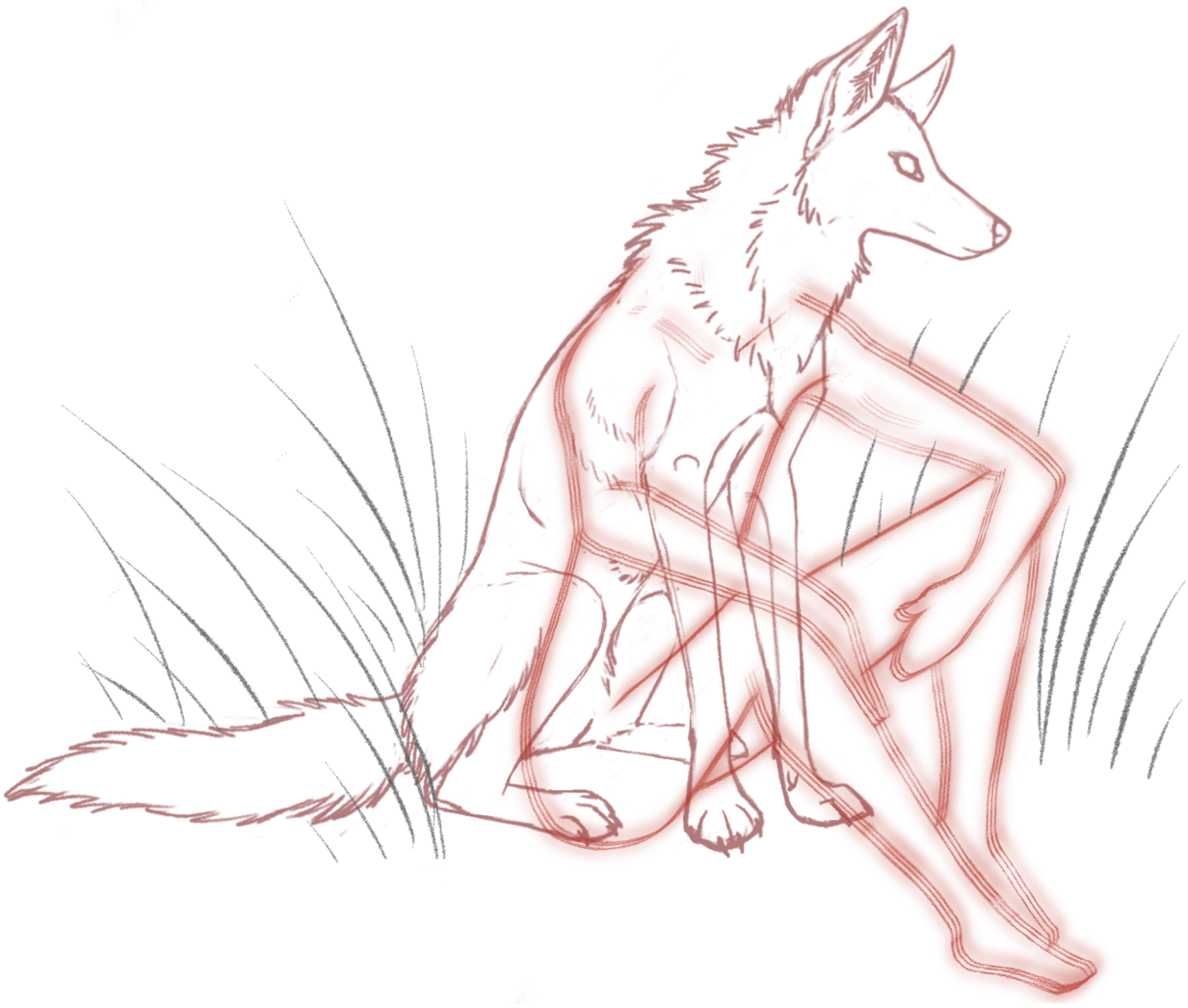
Baby I am something else
My love we work every day in a life we never chose to live
You work tirelessly with the grace and elegance of an archer bearing down a running deer.
Your logic and constructs build a home to keep us safe.
Your wits and social skills keep us fed.
I have never stopped to admire your work
you move through humanity with a passion I do not understand
in-turn
You never understand my work to be an animal
to be the free and untouched
Where instinct rules with an iron first
By senses and impulsivity aiding its domain

Together we move in tangent
bound together for the rest of our days
I couldn't live without you
I know you couldn't live without me

For that, I love you.

2’

By Kisota



2'

By Kisota

Twenty-four inches up, the world comes into perspective.

Points of contact maximized, senses connected, angle corrected.

What transpires between me and the earth can be nothing less than the breath of life itself. The musk of fetid marigold, fringed sage's spice, saccharine sweetgrass carried on heady lake-water wind.

No longer disconnected and drifting through dreams, I'm all-at-once, here-and-now.

The stillness is kinesthetic. I feel the erratic, moshpit fervor of dragonflies. The waltzing sway of long grasses. The coyote's buoyant lope, tangram toes dancing over dusted clay baked hard by sun.

The percussion of insects backs the symphony with grasshopper snares and cicada cymbals rolling under meadowlarks' liquid flutes.

There's always only this moment.

But the moment passes like every one must, and I rise,

released,

adrift again,

but renewed,

and wade into summer thrumming with possibility.

Auumah

By Ey'teneh-Onik

There is lightning in my blood and it burns me.
It whispers magic in my ears and pours fire down my throat,
It blinds me with snow and rain and gale.

It eats away at my flesh,
Exposing bones forged from silver and bleeding violet purple,
Splashing vibrant color against clay and stone.

It transmutes language to music,
Words becoming notes in my mind and organizing a melody in my throat.
And it comes as a sigh, exhaling Ozone.



It comes as a storm on shining moonstone scales,
Inexplicable,
'Impossible',
Instinctual unity in perception,
That I am One with everything—

Yet,

I am but a fragment,
a fading passage,
In woven music known as being—

And I claw at that longing again,
Alien words and concepts spiralling,
Colors new,
twin suns inspiring,

From feeling just a spark in my blood.

Conversations With The Housecat

By Silver & Rain of The Dragonheart Collective

_ Hello, other little Thing With Paws

* Am I like you?

_ You flinch at the loud sounds, you walk on paws, like Little Animals should

_ You sharpen claws and use them, you remember how to bite, how to growl

_ You lie in the sun and dream of catching plump ducks and little wriggling bugs and tender velvety mice

_ You know how to speak like Little Animals should- press close in face and speak the words Little Animals speak

_ And oh, you speak it so well you understand this now; the language of paw and eyes and tail and ears- that your flesh does not have them matters not

_ You know how to love with claws without hurting, how to see little things, how to find magic in nothing

_ You love like a Little Animal should -wholly, deeply, simply- the proper loyal animal-love of the clowder, nothing more, nothing less

_ You know four-paws is best, and how to purr yourself brave and calm

_ Most of all, Those That Are People treat you like one. They are Big, they must know.

_ People don't speak to Little Animals, they talk about us while we sit pretty nearby, and I hear how they speak of you in People-Words

_ The ears and whiskers and tail of your heart show bright

_ So tell me; name yourself, what are you?

* A little Thing With Paws.

* Little Things With Paws understand,
so a Thing With Paws is what I must be

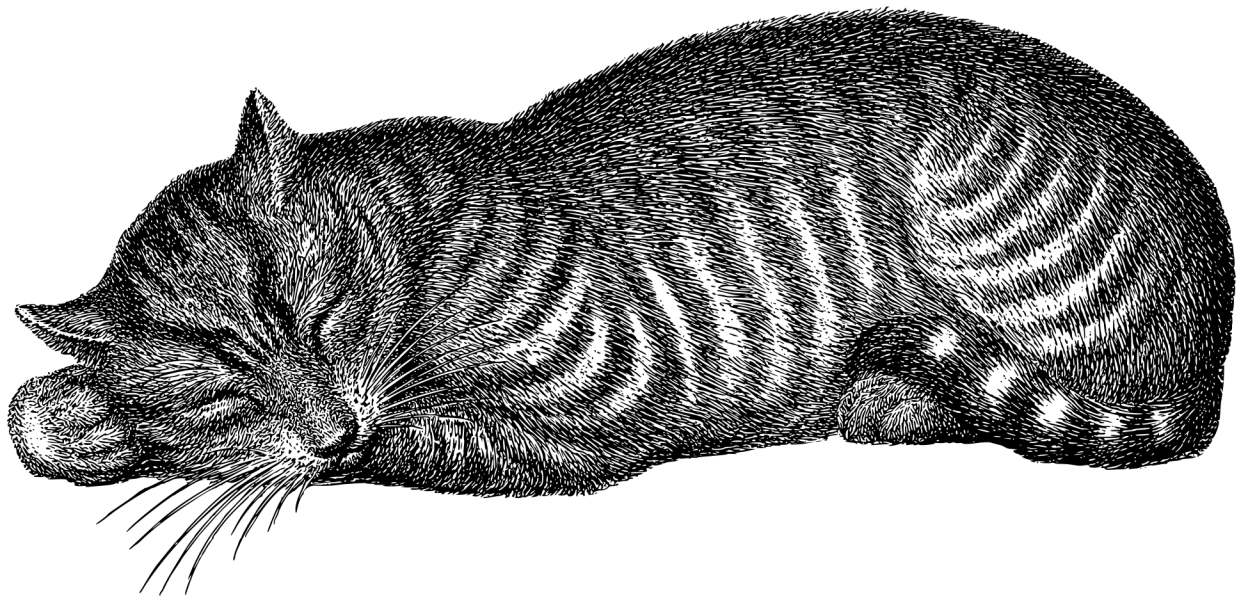
_ Of course you are, Paw-Brother

* I'd like to know what
home is like, Paw-Brother

_ It is the shape of love. It is shed-fur-on-pelts, it is the trust that there will be no hurt, it is another who presses close and purrs for you when you cannot.

* Home isn't with Those
That Are People,
I don't think it ever has been.
Home is with you.

_ And I you.



Cyborg

By Zavegonzo

They like math a lot. Always have. Whenever they get a math problem right, some deep part of their mind flutters in joy. It makes them feel right.

They like art, too. Always have. When they open up their computer tower to clean it, they take a moment to just admire all of the different intricate chips, fans, and wires so elegantly placed. No painting could compare to such a masterpiece.

They don't like being looked at. Never did. When they have to go somewhere, their form is always covered with long sleeves, a hood, pants going past their ankles. At least like this, they can pretend like there's something else underneath the surface.

They don't like restrictions. Never did. They don't want to be restricted by boredom, or by outside problems keeping them from doing whatever task they're doing. Those things make them feel useless. They don't like feeling useless.

They've always felt useless.

They don't know what the problem causing this is.

They're at their school, silently doing work in the computer lab. They feel distant from the monitor, from the keyboard, from the circuits in the tower just a few feet away. They want to be closer. They don't know why.

They're at home. It's a school night, but they're keeping themself up restlessly searching the internet. Looking up tech. Looking up cyborgs. Looking up self-hatred. They want an answer. They don't know what question to ask.

Their eyes are leaking.

One of those cyborgs is in their math class. They can't help but look with envy at his half-machine body. They feel guilty for the thought, burying it and replacing it with the fleeting satisfaction of finishing more equations.

They're a human.

They like being quiet. Always have. Whenever the teacher asks someone to speak up, they're never the one to raise their hand, never the one to speak. Their voice is too awkward and hesitant.

They like to pretend. Always have. Their whole life, they've been pretending. Pretending to be cis, pretending to be comfortable around other humans, pretending to be a…

They catch themself again.

They don't like being honest. Never did. Being honest always results in being hurt. They know it from experience.

They don't like crying. Never did. Crying is gross. They hate how much they cry. It's messy and unproductive. It makes them feel useless. It happens whenever they're honest with themself. It's a problem.

The problem is that they're a human.

A few years pass. They're as quiet as ever. They pretend a little bit less, but not so little that people notice. They graduate under the wrong name, wearing the wrong face. They move out for college. As soon as they're independent, they cut off every part of their old life. They change their documents to match who they really are, always have been, and start talking with a therapist.

There's still another thing to do.

Over the years, they had done their research. Official websites for hospitals. Old, forgotten chatrooms for humans like themself. Sensational news articles. Promises made by overzealous CEOs that were never followed up on. They know what can and can't be done. They know the risks. They know the stigma.

They know the process is imperfect, but it's better than nothing. Thanking whoever came up with the idea of informed consent, they arrange an appointment with only a phone call. They're given some papers to sign, and then a date for the operation.

Their heart—which won't be theirs for much longer—beats with excitement.

When the day comes, it seems to fly by in an instant. They meet with the doctor. She talks with them about what they've decided they want their new chassis to be like. The table presses against their back. They stare up at the ceiling. The doctor puts a mask on their face. A bitter smell fills their nose. They take a few deep breaths, one, two, three…
They don't have lungs to take a fourth with.

Their cameras flicker on. The white blur in front of them focuses back into that ceiling. The smell is gone. So is their olfactory system.

The doctor helps them sit up. Her hands seem so much warmer than before.

They look down. It takes them a moment to register that this smooth, mechanical, nonhuman chassis they see is their own. The only human part remaining is their brain. They run a claw down one of their hard-shelled legs. They smile.

They like being a cyborg. Always will.

Vis Tenebris

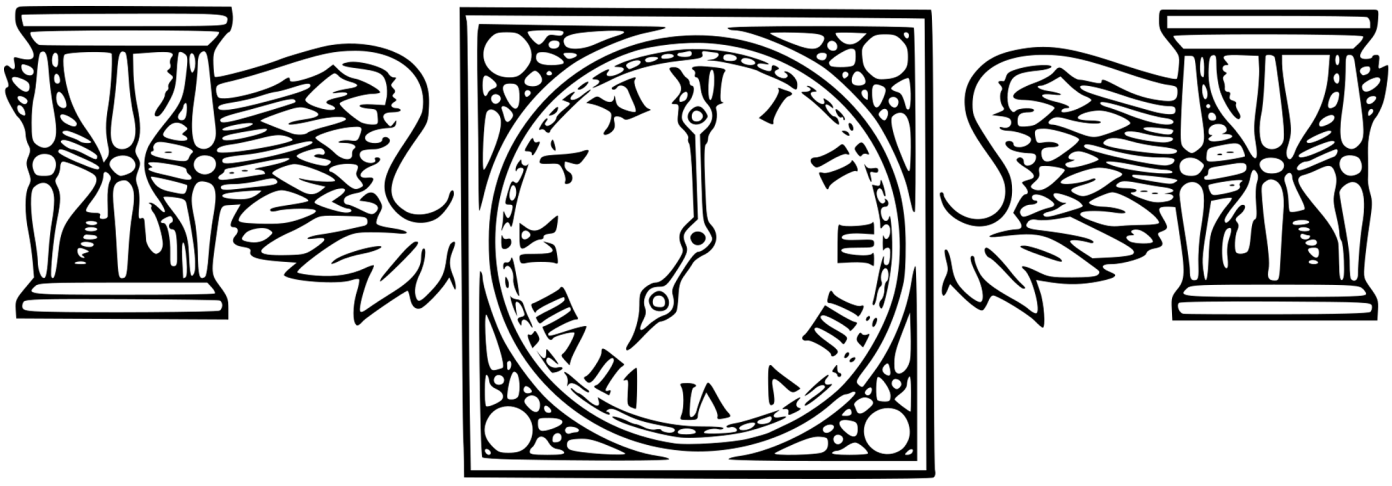
the force of darkness forever strong…

By Pale M. L. Greenwood

The dust swirled at his ankles as he stepped up to the cliff's edge, quick but light, ashen and dead. "Quickly, now," she said, and that voice of hers hurt, hurt like glass shards driven into his skin one by one. He supposed nothing else would really make sense. "I don't know what you'll find in there, but… Calm her. Please. I know you can do it."

Her faith in him was anything but encouraging. He squared his shoulders anyway, staring up towards the swirling mass of ash and dust. It surrounded the one who had dreamed his bloodline into existence. The woman beside him glittered with glass and shining crystal- her form, just as it was a reflection of his own. He'd never be as close to sacred crystal as she was, just by her existence. Even that was too little and too much. He'd always be more bone than crystal.

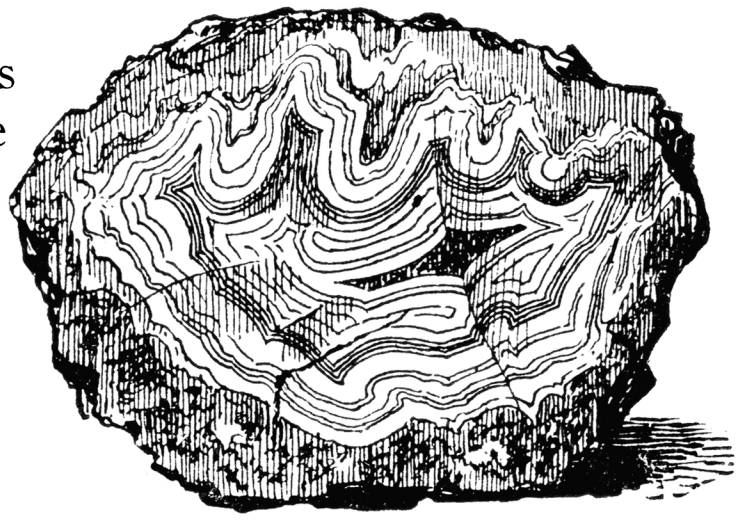
A vividly-blue portal opened in front of him, its edges sharp and shimmering. He was beginning to hate the shimmering light. The wailing mass on the portal's other side seemed quiet when he peered through it. Looks were always deceiving, even if they were clear as shining crystal. He took a breath, willing himself the strength to persevere, and stepped through.



Eye of the storm. If nothing else, that was how he could describe it. Eye of the storm, and the worst was yet to come. The space around him was dark- violet like a bruise on shadowed, discoloured skin. It was still impermeable, winded, existent only because he needed it to. He winced at the air and the energy around him, attempting to ignore the painful sensation of magic. It felt superheated and crackling on the skin, and at the same time silk-soft and frozen. He focused instead on the winds whipping by without ever touching him, and it wasn't a certainty if that was worse or not. Better, because at least he wasn't getting dragged into it, at least he was slightly more likely to survive. But worse all the same, because it treated him as beneath notice, as untouchable, as something foreign and intruding. This was supposed to be home.

Lights glittered before him, in the very heart of the storm of pain. This is what he came for, to calm the storm, to stop the mother of them all from rending the plane asunder in her childlike wrath. They were dreams, dolls, barely even that; and if they wanted to survive, they had no other option but to take everything from her, everything that they had left her with originally. It was a cruelty. It was a kindness. It was blood on his hands that was never going to come off, to perform an act of good and evil in such extreme, equal amounts that it would always, and never, amount to zero. He stepped forward, one hand on a sword meant to bring down the heavens, and the other full of fire, black and red with a golden center that said 'home' far more than this vast, swirling tempest of violet fog.

There were two lights at the center, barely aurora-shimmers, barely the lights reflected off crystal spires. One blue, one violet, humming and shimmering like the twins they were meant to represent. He stepped forward, hands extinguishing the fire, holding his wrists out open-palmed to the lights.



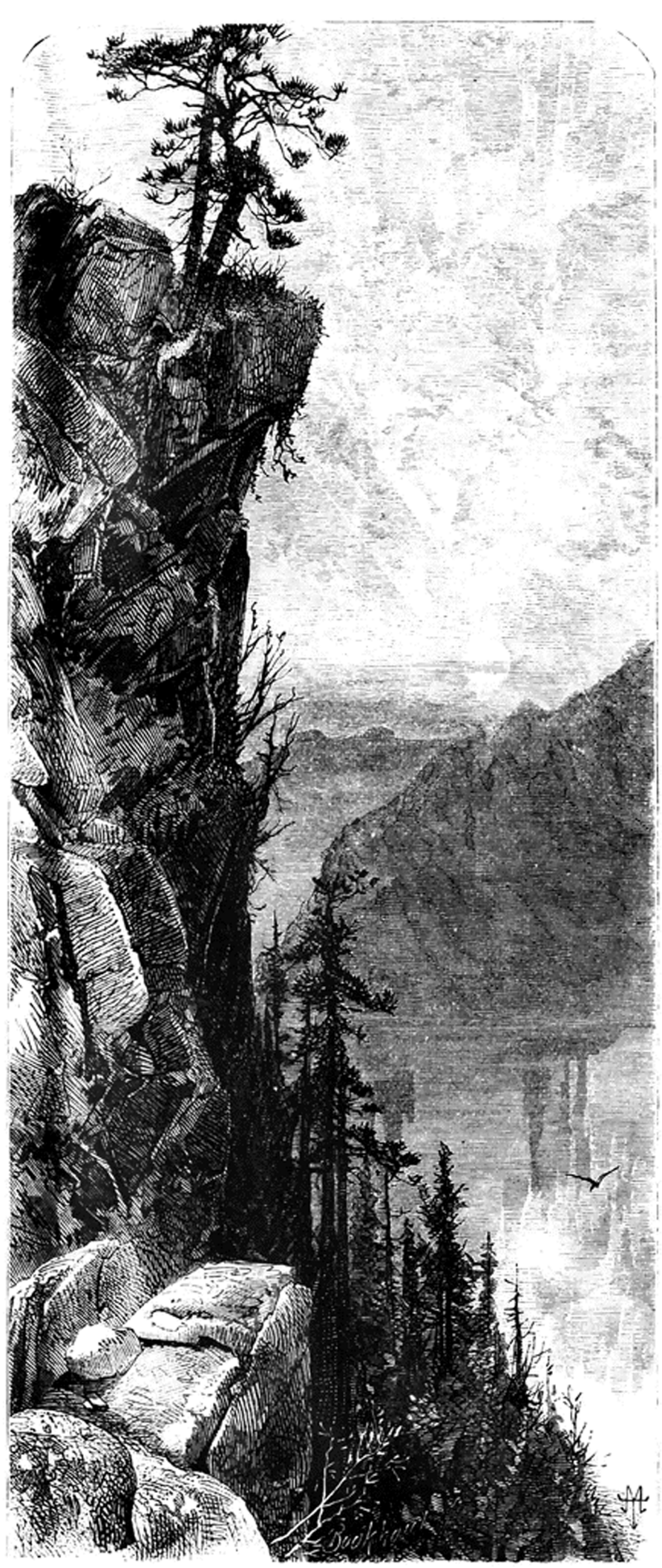
Somehow, it always came back to the light that would never leave him, that he never wanted, that asked for honesty and humanity in the same breath. He wasn't sure how long he could remain truthful, with every adventure stripping more of his defenses away. Soon enough, there wouldn't be any humanity left to soften his edges, and he'd be as cruel as the rest of his family, with none of the kindness to blunt the blades. Assuming he wasn't already.

He reached forward, and placed one hand in each light, feeling out the threads of power within the winds around him. He could feel it, of course- of the very idea of howling, screaming winds fast enough to slice anything open; even stone, even hearts. Even crystal. There was nothing but silence around him, waiting, watching, spinning around him without ever touching him.



The lights hummed under his hands, offering power, offering visions, offering memories of what they represented. He reached further into them, towards them, offering sympathy and child's-love and the way every scion of a forgotten bloodline reaches towards the old. If he could calm the storm… Wisps of violet fog slipped away from the tempest, slipped towards him, wandering towards each other. They collided in silent cracks, ephemeral blinding lights before darkening in mass and form. He knew these monsters, as he looked up towards the one on the other side of the lights. It snarled down at him, twice his height, eyes focused on him like the dream he had always been and the nightmare that had spawned it.

He closed his eyes, hummed to the crystal that halfway made up his beating, broken heart, and reached for the light.



The storm faded around him like it had never been there at all, and he fell to the ground, shins in the dust and palms finding the charred, blackened earth beneath the ash as he tried to stop the shaking of his bones. He had never felt so energized, the liquid power bleeding through him, lacerating its way through his flesh, licking at his skeleton like so many flames, threatening to consume him unless he brought it under control. He had never felt so exhausted. The sorrow had been too much to carry, too much to even know, and so it had slipped by him entirely, taking everything he had with it, until all he had was thrumming, painful power and the knowledge of what the mother of his bloodline thought of her creations.

None would know. None could know. Beside him, the woman stifled a sob. "She's never going to wake up again," she said, softly. "This is… they stole it from her. They stole everything from her."

He didn't bother to tell her that it wasn't a 'they', that he had stolen it, that he had been the one to commit the act. She had seen it, and she would never know it . Even if he hadn't been the one whose hands her corpse would remember, he still had his father's blood. He would always have been complicit, and she would never know. She had never seen anything but the way humanity had blunted his edges and softened the blades, and he supposed there was only one thing left to do before this final adventure stripped it all away. No matter how the final pieces fell, of the chessboard or of his heart, he was never going to make it out with his humanity intact. His humanity was all the woman had seen. If the mother of his bloodline had seen anything else of him, she hadn't told him. Even to the end, he was a concept. Even to the end, he was beneath notice.

Yet still, the entity in front of him that had begun it all breathed, if only faintly, if not enough to stir the ashes. He rose, shifting his weight back, dragging his legs through the ash before settling cross-legged in the smouldering embers. They, too, would die soon. If he knew anything at all about the energy of those far above him, it was that the marks they left on a world only stayed when the world was awake to preserve their tears. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes, focusing the newfound power coursing through him, and called to the entity of creation in front of him, ignoring the weeping woman to his right-hand side. The entity in front of him had never loved him, never known him, never been aware he was more than a fleeting thought dreamed up by a dream of hers that ran away and left her behind. He had always, always loved her, never returning until his hand had been forced, terrified she would not approve.



She had never been enough like him to understand what approval meant. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes; wisps of memory floating past him, fleeting and foggy and half-forgotten. Mostly forgotten, if he was being honest, but cruelty and dishonesty held hands down that unlovable path, and he was stripping away the softened edges of his humanity with every new moment he spent on this hellish cliff. It wasn't right to speak to her in a language she had never heard, not even in her dreams, not even as she lay dying. The dreams he held in his crystalline heart were too far apart to truly echo hers, but they remembered it all the same.

"Akrek en sra ksurae u' o zarukt vomeur," he began, and his voice was raw, and he remembered every syllable like the last moment between consciousness and sleep, and he had no idea what any of it meant. The words he said meant 'This is the story of a great warrior', and the meaning he spoke was 'I love you, and I'm sorry', and if those two things were dissimilar, he didn't know it. Humanity had softened his edges and worn away the finer points of him, taking language and memory and honour and character with it, replacing it with something larger, less forgiving, more human. There wasn't many of them left. They were sharper and crueller, but humanity was larger and softer and shone brighter. There is a price to be paid in burning slow, and humanity hadn't known what the word 'slow' meant until they stared out into eternity and universally decided to simply break it.



He recited syllables he knew by heart but not the meaning of, telling the last bedtime story he could ever remember being passed down to him by his bloodline. There was a cruel irony there, too, if he cared to look for it. What else was a human, anyway, if not the rising, storytelling ape? What defined the parts of him that weren't human was crystal, and there was no crystal that anyone else would be able to hear, not without breaking it. Too many things were broken already, one cracked rib and fractured heart and broken mother's body all added to the pile of spoils. So he told a story he knew every syllable of but not the meaning of any word of it, reaching forward with his power, catching the edges of the life force left within the sleeping entity before him. To catch her attention, for the first and last time of his life. To call her to listen to him, as he told a story he doubted he would ever whisper again. And to pull the life force from her, because to walk away from her suffering was worse a sin than making it all stop. He wouldn't, couldn't have told her any other story. The last gift he could ever have offered her was familiarity. It wasn't right to pollute her death with humanity's influence.

He told her a story he didn't remember about a warrior who fought the elements of lightning and lava to save his family, blood-tied and oath-sworn at his side. A warrior who stood alone only in history, who had never seen what lay past this wrecked, burning plane. The woman beside him knew this story, knew the meaning of the words far better than he did. She said nothing as he called their mother's last drops of energy from her, listened to a story that might have seemed to her nothing but a tale of bloodshed and sorrow. It was not enough, and they both knew it, and there was beauty there, and neither of them knew that either.

He rose to his feet a moment after he finished, the final 'Varch sen' whispered into the silent air, to a still, silent corpse, and did not look at the woman he might have called half-sister. He could feel her magic, light to his dark, and did not look to her as she addressed him.

"My brother will be looking to speak with you, S. Larius," she said, and her voice was a crystalline macramé, transparent and uncertain and considering shattering at any moment. Of course her brother would want to speak to him, and worse, by a name he'd never truly answered to. A name too human even for him. He wondered, briefly, if this would be the killing mark to finally hurt him, show a man he might have called half-brother the corpse of his mother. If this was the means to find out if the man could be hurt at all. If this didn't hurt him, then nothing would.

"We aren't going back," he said, finally, after a moment, and he did not look at her. "You understand that, right? No matter where we go from here, we aren't ever going back to before this moment." His words were carefully, ever so carefully chosen. He wasn't going to dream up a reality, but he could lie, and that was the closest he was ever going to get to the crystalline mind that bore them. He said 'we're never going back', and he meant 'you will never be forgiven', and if she heard what he said and not what he meant, it was no longer his concern.

She looked away from him, out of the corner of his eye, to stare out into the distance. "I won't forgive him, for letting this happen. I'm sorry you had to get involved." She turned, then, and walked away, crystalline footsteps echoing off the still-smouldering cinders.

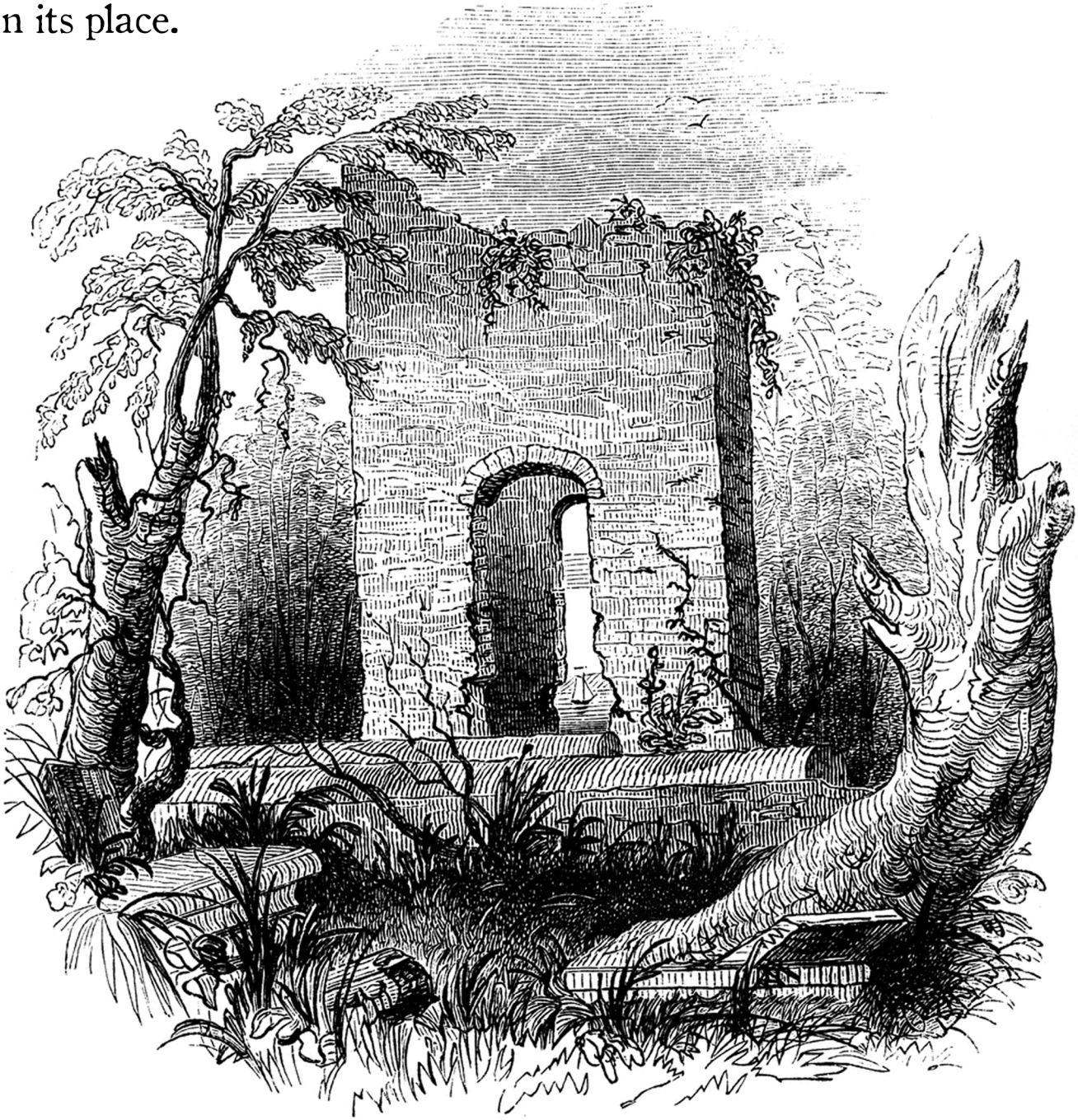
He waited until she was out of his sight before releasing his clenched, bloody fists. If he was bleeding, he didn't know it. If he was family, she didn't know that, either. She had never known his heart to be anything but bloody flesh. There was nothing else left to be. Not after this.

He turned towards the corpse that once had dreamt his ancestors into existence. She still bled magic, memories, everything that once had made her what she was. Even shimmers of aurora, every few moments, like will o' the wisps that had no home to guide him to. He'd already drowned it in blood. Nobody could see him, here, and the sky was ashen with a warning of acid rain. Not even the stars, distant and new compared to time set deep in the cinders, could witness what had happened, or what had to follow.

He pressed two fingers to his chest, slipping under the breastplate of his armoured robe, and dug deep through the skin. It gave way like so much cobwebbed macramé, until his fingertips brushed the smooth, beating surface of a crystalline heart.

She did not recognize him as family, and it was her orders that had power coursing through his veins, power stolen from the one who had birthed them both. Power enough to break even hearts of stone.

"Varch sen," he murmured, and what it meant was 'The end', and what he meant was 'I'm sorry'. He closed his eyes, pulled his hand from his chest, and buried his heart in the cinders, leaving nothing but a hollow of bloody flesh in its place.



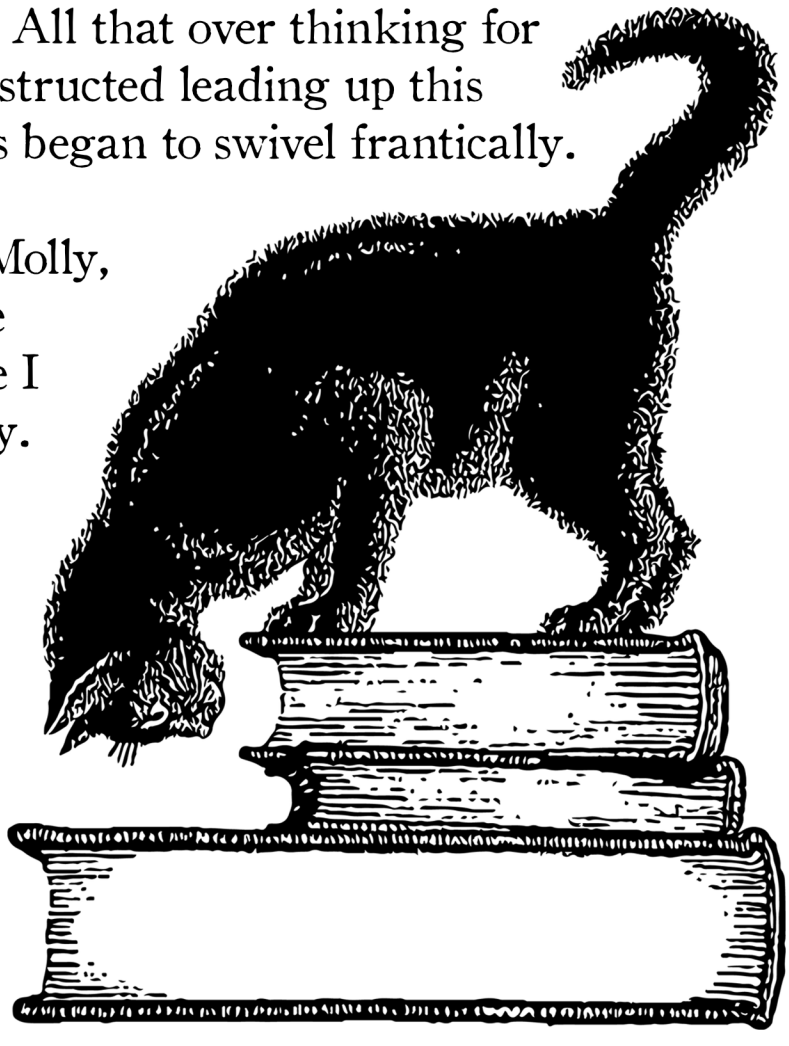
Newspaper Article

By House of Chimeras

I'm not one for puns but standing there I was suddenly living the phrase "deer in the headlights." Not literally as there was no car before me as I was two stories up in the building I worked at, but certainly, emotionally, I was a deer in the headlights. I had been caught in a situation I was not ready for and all I could do was stand there and stare with dread.

My instincts didn't know whether to fight or flee. I couldn't even parse out if my instincts wanted to do either literally or figuratively. I just stood there, wide-eyed and my phantom ears pricked in full-alarm position. I just stared at my coworker as my brain tried to regain traction.

"Huh?" I choked out. Oh yeah, real smooth. I had played this scenario in my head so many times in the past. All that over thinking for nothing. Everything I had ever constructed leading up this moment had fled. My phantom ears began to swivel frantically.



"Isn't this you in the newspaper?" Molly, my office coworker, said waving the news clipping in the air a little. Like I hadn't noticed her holding it already.

Snapped out of my paralysis I reflectively reached out for the scrap of paper and she readily handed it over. I flipped it around and dazedly looked it over.

It was an article from a newspaper.

The Transspecies Are Fighting Like Animals, Just For A Little Respect

Transspecies is real and their needs, while different, are just as important as the treatment for gender dysphoria is for transgender people.

That’s the conclusion of several studies by Dr. Miriam Williams and her colleagues who have been conducting case studies spanning over 7 years. I caught up with her during the in-person Othercon 2030 conference that took place last weekend.

"It is our hope our case studies will shed light on the most effective ways to treat species dysphoria. Species dysphoria is a real condition, but how to manage it is a challenge. Early research suggests that counseling and antidepressant medication are aids, but such methods only deal with symptoms of the dysphoria rather than the dysphoria itself. Our ongoing study hopes to enlighten us on what works best in mitigating the harm that severe species dysphoria can cause. We are monitoring over 70 patients as they achieve their own personal methods in managing their own species dysphoria and keeping track on how their mental wellness is effected,” Dr. Williams said.

When pressed for what these “goals” are, Dr. Williams stated they ranged from simply coming out to friends and family about being alterhuman to wearing costumery as part of their everyday dress or even actual body modification. Indeed, I saw several convention-goers walking around with tails or masks.

While at the convention, I came across a 26-year-old buck who has legally changed his name to Roe Hart. Roe Hart identifies as a roe deer and he explained his goals to make himself feel more at home in his own skin to me.

"I have a surgery date coming up in 5 months to have these metal plates attached to my skull with studs poking out. Once all that heals, I will be able to screw on any of these 12 sets of artificial roe deer antlers I've had commissioned just for me. After that, I can go about with antlers matching the season of the year, and I can take them off or put them on as needed," Roe said.

Roe Hart isn't the only person who has legally changed his name that I met up with. Another, con-goer has legally changed its first name to Celebi. Celebi is a 21-year-old Pokémon fictionkin who used it/its pronouns. Celebi has no plans to undergo any type of body modification, but instead rarely goes anywhere without a shawl with a dragonfly-like wing design. It is also going through a gender transition to-

The article continued on, but I stopped reading and pulled my eyes away from the text of the article to look at the photo accompanying the image. Under the boldface type and beside the text of the article was a grayscale image of several people standing around. One of the faces that could be easily made out in the photo was me standing beside the campfire talking with a Dalmatian mix therian who went by the name Spot. Despite the low quality of the photograph, I could still make out the tattooed spots on Spot's upper arms that had already been completed by the time of the con.

“Roe Hart is a really unique name, and that sure does look like you in the photo. Also, if that is you, the deer-themed things in your office make so much more sense now,” Molly rambled as Roe continued to stare down at the news clipping.

I just stood there. My instincts cried out, wanting to bolt, but I just stood there frozen. Why was I suddenly nervous? I had my surgery date coming up. I wasn't planning on wearing my antlers at work, but the studs were still going to be visible on my head. People were going to ask questions. People had already asked questions when I finally legally changed my name half a year ago. I had made my decision to be open about my being a deer already. I needed to get over wanting to bolt whenever the chance to be open about being a therian came up. I just needed to get the courage to just be okay with people knowing.

“Yes,” I said suddenly, a little more confidently than I felt, as I looked up finally from the piece of paper in my hands.

“Yes?” Molly asked, seemingly forgetting her own question a moment before.

“Yes, that is me. In the photo,” I clarified. The look on Molly’s face after I affirmed her suspicion was hard to read. She looked almost nervous herself.

“That's really cool," Molly said a little shyly, "because I’m a therian as well. I've never met another alterhuman in real-life before. I-”

“What?” I blurted out.

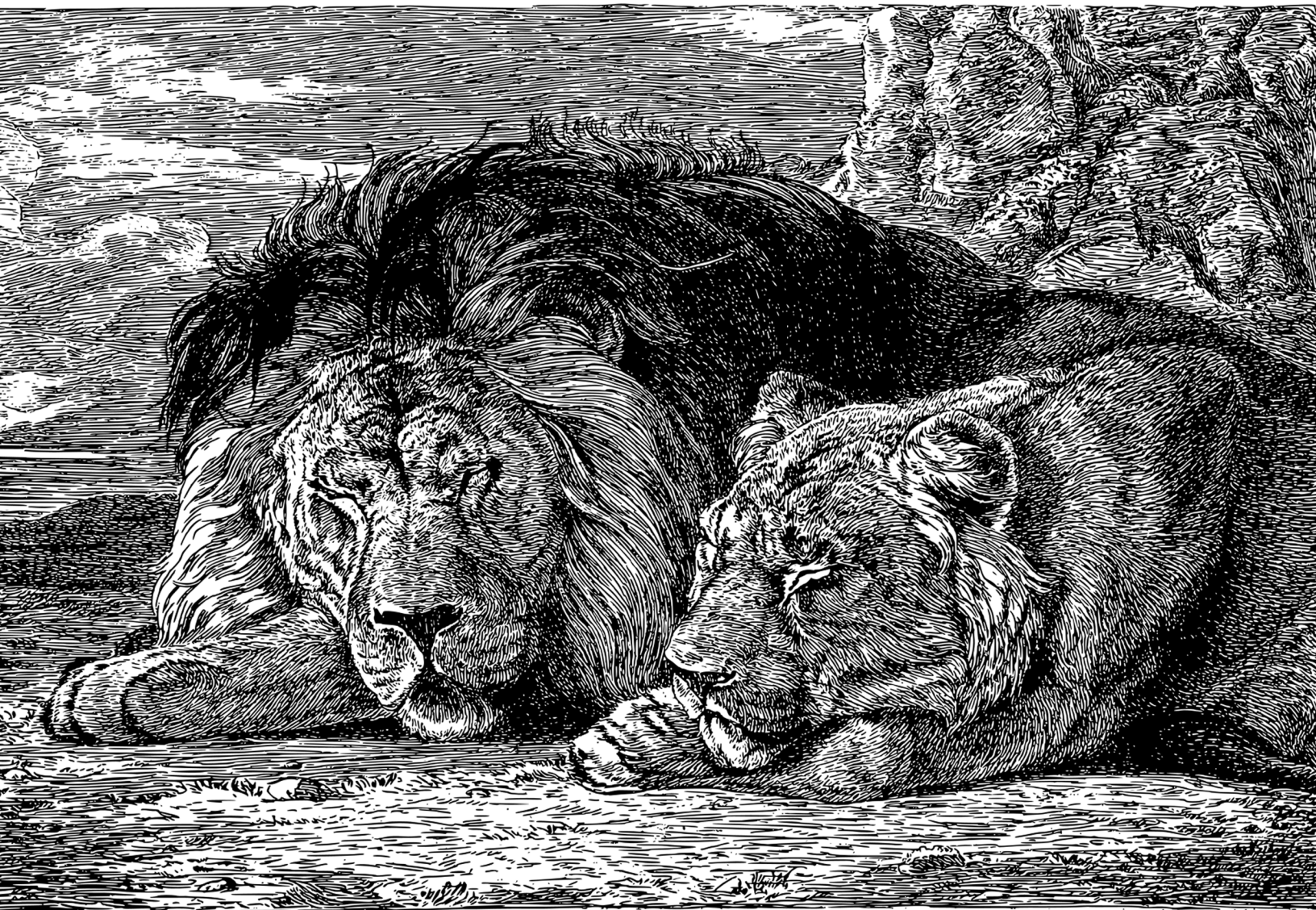


“A lion. I'm a lion," Molly said taking the news clipping from me and looking at it herself. "I thought of going to the con but, I chickened out."

I started to say something, but just then another coworker came around the corner and greeted us.

"Can we talk more after work?" Molly asked hopefully.

"That sounds good to me," I said thinking about my luck to be working with another alterhuman of all the chances. As we stood there talking to our coworker about an upcoming deadline, I acutely felt my phantom antlers on my head, and I found myself no longer feeling as nervous about my upcoming surgery to make them a reality.



Passing By

By Anonymous

Alone
Among people
In a town
Filled with laughter and
Rumors.

Every
Sound so
Loud and clear
I can smell whatever
You hide behind
Your mask.
Miles away.

Even
At home
Not at peace
Heart beating, drumming.
Invisible planes.
Aching.

Missing
A family
And friends too
Only I would
Remember.

Looking
At skies
To see nothing
That resembles
Source.

Shift
In mind.
Parts of me
I knew.
Shadows.
Dragged
Into trouble
Following ancient instincts.
Fighting.
Urges
Nonhuman
Yet also me.
Let
Me be
A good one
As
Long as
I walk Earth
Unseen
Hopefully until
Astral limbs become
Real
In
A world
I called mine
Once.

Not
Powers, abilities,
But the will to
Change.
Learn,
Sometimes help.
I do not want to
Repeat
Mistakes
Or lies.
I do not want to
Hurt.

Another
Story ends,
A book closed.
Questions.
Yet
Somewhere fiction
Is really real.
Otherkin
Fictionkin.
Alterhuman.
True self.
An Old Soul
Passing by because
Psychology.
Mission.
Curiosity.
Misplaced.
I am
On my way
Back.

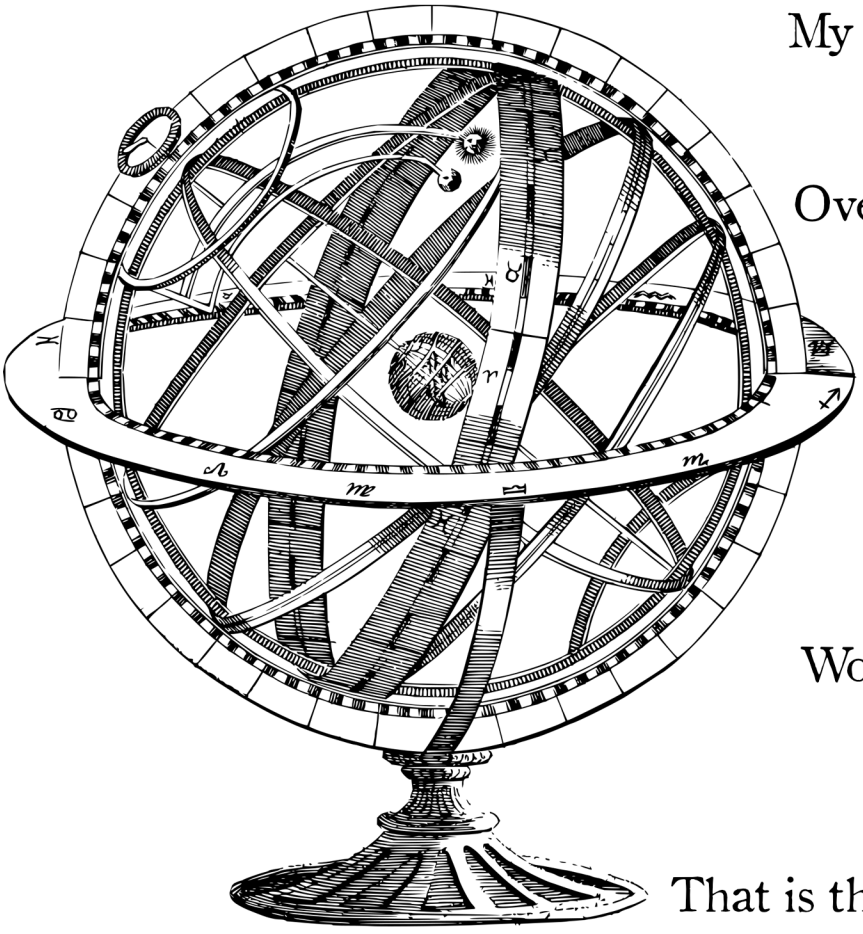
Subtle
Signs, marks.
Not a brand.
Wrong.
Face
In the mirror.
Mornin'!

Just…
Different.

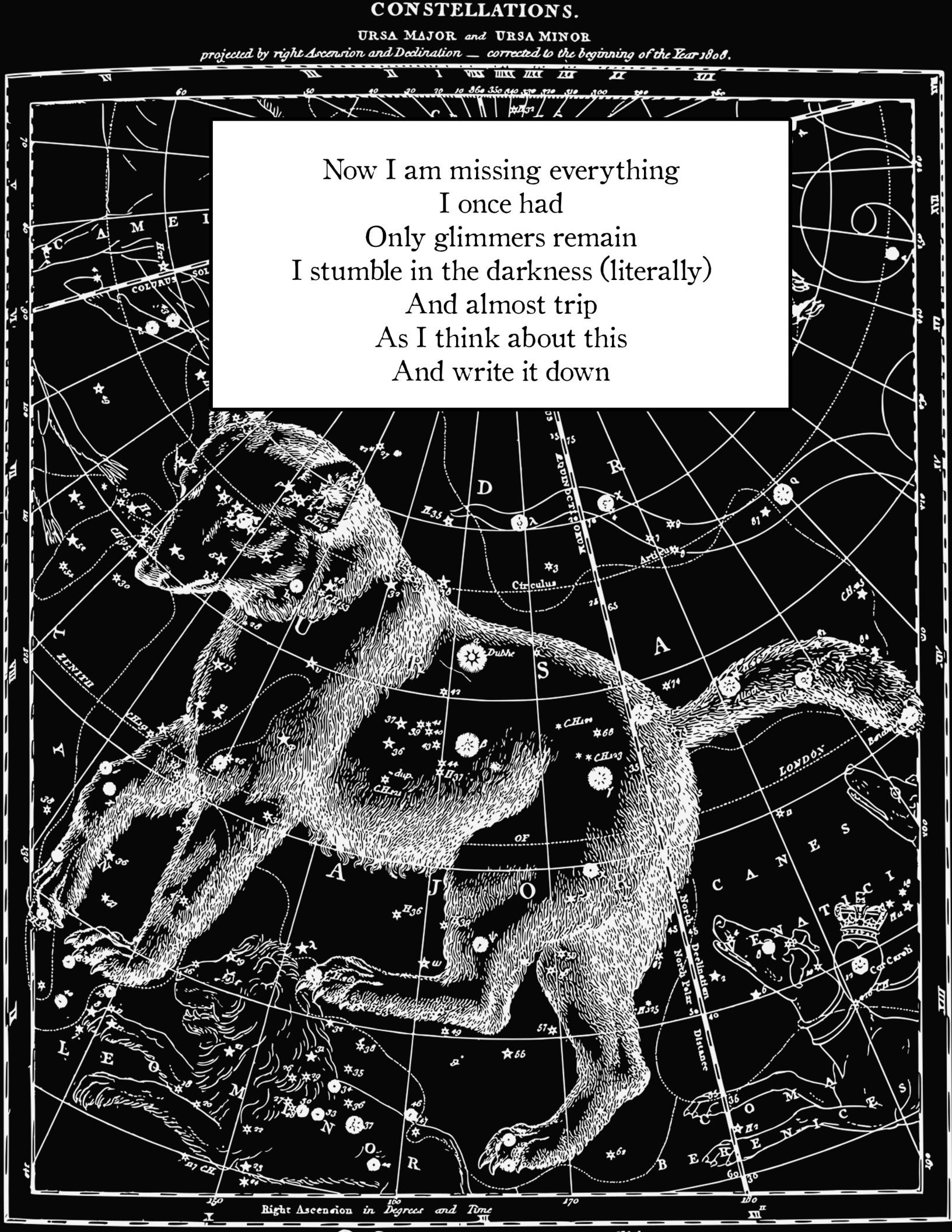
Poem

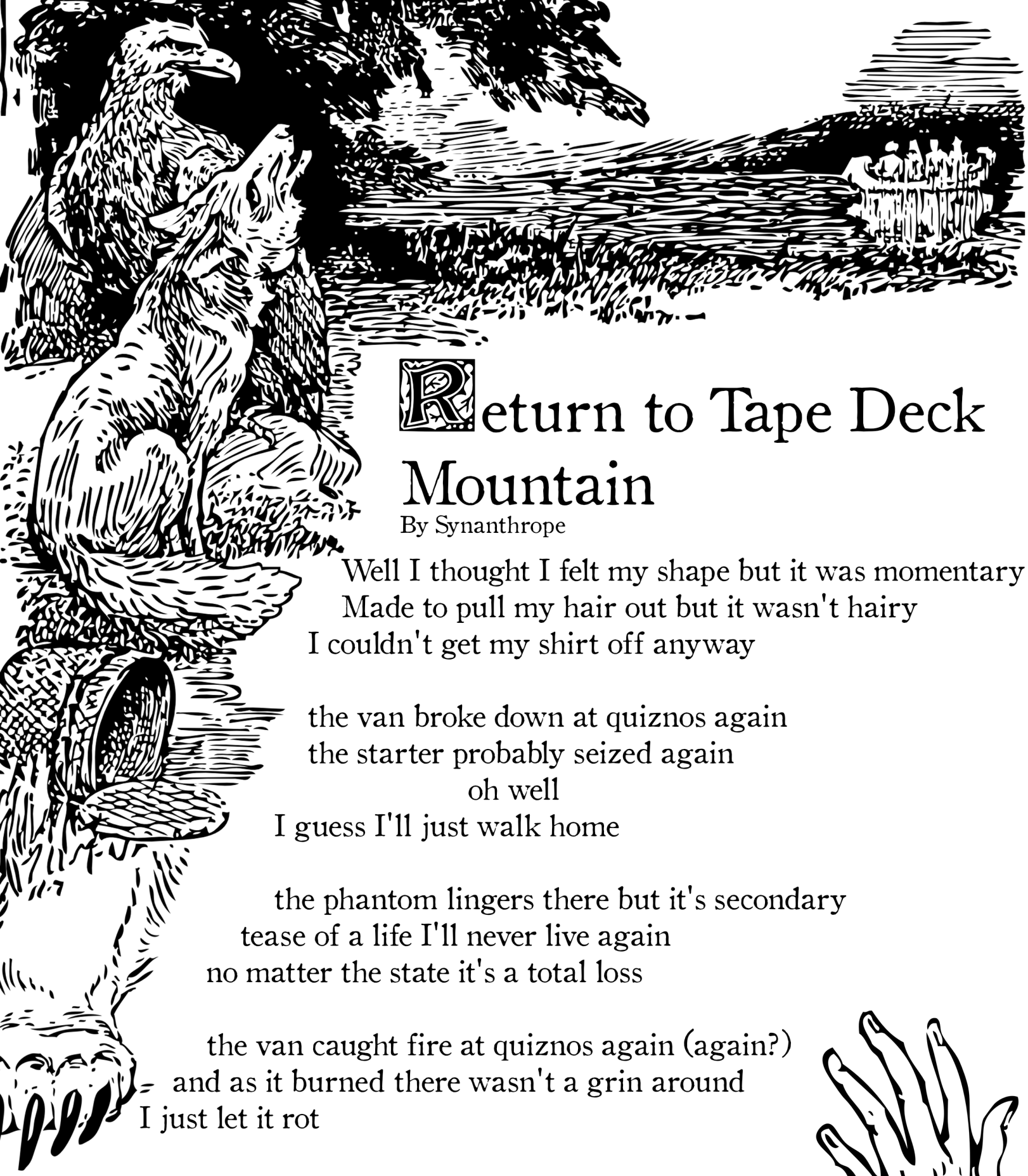
By Sya

I wake up in the early morning
And see one star in the sky
But then I realize that's no star
It's mars
Then I wonder how humanity might colonize that red dot
In this lifetime
But I tell myself I can't leave earth
On my own ship
All I'll ever know is earth
I'm trapped here
The best of human manned spacecraft
As I write this,
Can barely leave Earth's orbit



My strongest emotion is melancholy
Over things I lost
Over things I never can have
Over things I can barely remember
It is shattered
Like a broken mirror
What I lost is unique to me
Is lost on others
Only I can comprehend
No one but me understands
This melancholy
Words can't capture the full extent
Of how I feel
It can only be explained
With vague remarks
That is the fullest extent that I can speak


CONSTELLATIONS.
URSA MAJOR and URSA MINOR
projected by right Ascension and Declination — corrected to the beginning of the Year 1806.
Now I am missing everything
I once had
Only glimmers remain
I stumble in the darkness (literally)
And almost trip
As I think about this
And write it down
Dubhe
Circulus
ZENITH
LONDON
North Pole
Distance
Right Ascension in Degrees and Time



Return to Tape Deck Mountain

By Synanthrope

Well I thought I felt my shape but it was momentary
Made to pull my hair out but it wasn't hairy
I couldn't get my shirt off anyway

the van broke down at quiznos again
the starter probably seized again
oh well
I guess I'll just walk home

the phantom lingers there but it's secondary
tease of a life I'll never live again
no matter the state it's a total loss

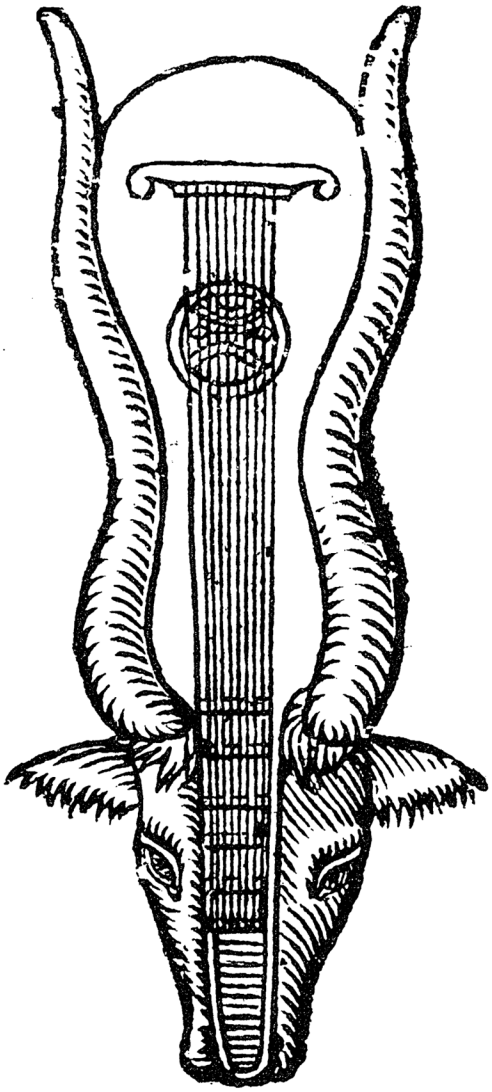
the van caught fire at quiznos again (again?)
and as it burned there wasn't a grin around
I just let it rot

and oh, what a loss
these soft hands replaced my paws
you turned me from a wild dog
oh why'd you do that, man

and you're always within arm's reach
but a million miles away
and hey I can touch you
but you can't feel it

and oh what a loss
I'll never feel the wind
as it whipples through the trees on my back
and it flattens both my ears are pinned back
as my body starts to shake

let me out (but you can't hear it)
let me out
let me out
let me out (I want the bone popping)
let me out
let me out
let me out (I want the back breaking)
let me out
let me out
let me out (I want the joint snapping)
let me out
let me out
let me out
can you hear it now?



let me run
let me run
let me run (I want the grass padding)
let me run
let me run
let me run
let me run (I want the breeze lifting)
let me run
let me run
let me run
let me run (I want to smell everything)
let me run
let me run
let me run
let me run



give me fleas, give me mange, I wanna run, open range

give me claws, give me fangs, I want to hunt, no more cage (I've done it once too much)

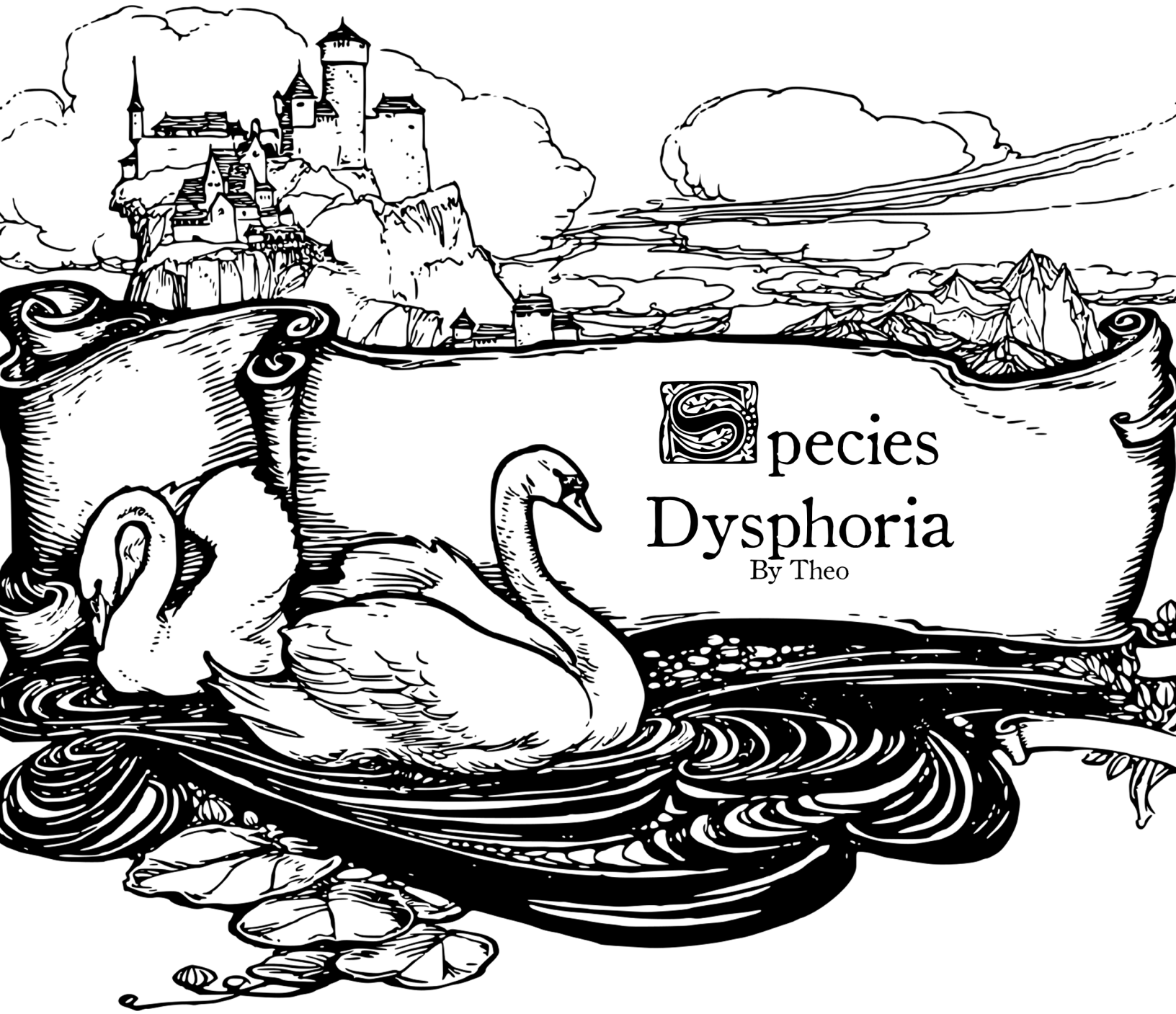
and we'll be coyote and play in the forest
dressed in the skin that just won't fit our bodies
but it won't stop us
my playmate

we'll dance around fires and echo a chorus
off mountains and cave-ins it's all laid out for us to live
and then die again

the euphoria sticks there like cigs in a civic
ozium bomb it but you'll never forget the smell
we're going back to hell

This schism between me and me, no
therianthropy has never treated me kindly





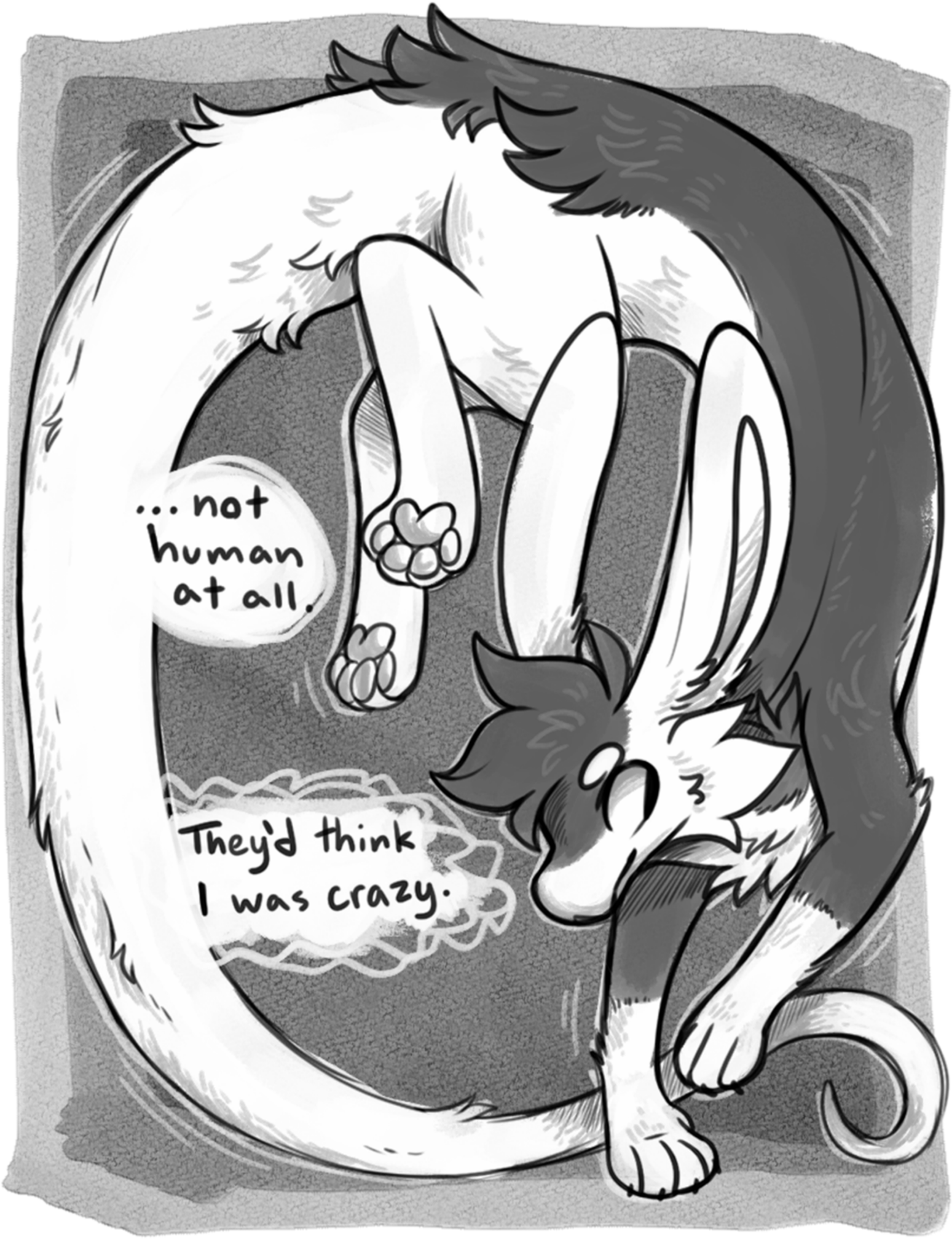
Species Dysphoria

By Theo


...
I dislike trying to articulate my dysphoria to most People.
I'm nonbinary, so the topic comes up a lot. It's inescapable.


But how do I tell my trans-friendly doctor,
or my queer, trans peers-
-when they ask what my ideal body would look like?...

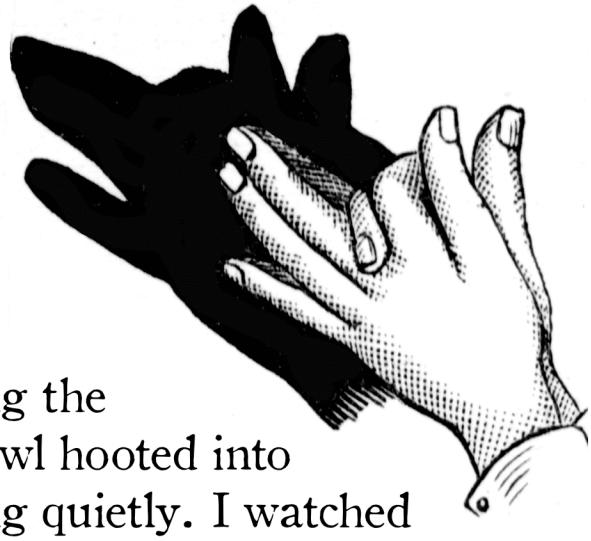

... that my hands wouldn't be hands?
Paws, and a maw full of sharp teeth...
...Long ears...
...and a tail to keep me steady.


... not human at all.
They'd think I was crazy.


My shape might be strange, but it would be mine.
I'd revel in it.
... if only.

The Wolf Within

By Kara



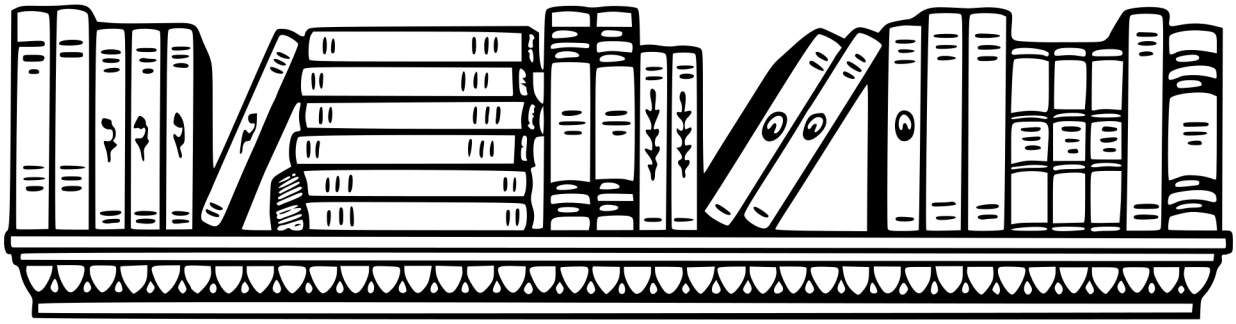
Wind whistled through the trees, gently swaying the moonlit leaves high above. In the distance, an owl hooted into the night. All throughout the trees, crickets sang quietly. I watched silently as a rabbit hopped along, searching through the grass, seeming minuscule among the trees. I inhaled the night air and leaned back against a boulder, resting arms behind my head. The rock was cold, but refreshing.

All was calm. In the forest, it always seemed tranquil. There was something about the way nature worked to maintain itself, a cycle as old as time, that felt so peaceful. It was like home. More of a home to me than my little apartment, or any of the houses I was raised in. Even more like home than any place I'd visited, or any person I'd met. I always felt outcast among others to some extent, but in the forest, I truly felt like I belonged.

I watched as little wisps of clouds rolled past the sliver of bright moon in the dark sky. A few stars dotted here and there, and I wondered how far I'd have to travel into the forest to see the full galaxy. I noticed I could see many more than in the city, though I wasn't that far out.

With a heavy sigh, I rose and started back to the city, remembering I had school in the morning. I had moved to this town for college, but intentionally rented an apartment as close to the woods as I could possibly get. My apartment wasn't anything amazing, but I was in walking distance from the trees, so I was satisfied.

I dejectedly walked home and plunged into my bed, letting out a groan when I saw the clock. I had spent too much time outside again. Remembering the feeling of grass on my feet and the fresh forest air, I knew it was worth it.



As I settled into my usual seat in the back of the large classroom, I noticed a shape move in next to me. It was my childhood friend, Kyle. We never had much in common and only became friends as children because we were neighbors, and we certainly weren't close, but we somewhat remained friends all these years. He was the kind of friend who you knew would always allow you to go along with him, but never bothered to invite you in the first place. I knew he had better friends, so why was he sitting next to me today?

"Hey, uh," Kyle scratched the back of his head, the uncomfortable look in his eyes being a dead giveaway of what he really wanted. "How's it goin'? Been a while since we talked, huh?"

I let out a small sigh. "You weren't paying attention yesterday, were you?"

Kyle nodded, averting his gaze for a moment, and I pulled my book out of my backpack and set it gently on the desk in front of us. Then, Kyle's eyes light up, seeming to remember something. "You know Claire, right?" Kyle asked, leaning forward with excitement. I nodded, and he continued. "She seems like your type, always reading books and stuff. We're all going to Ryan's on Friday night, do you wanna come? I know parties aren't really your thing, but you might meet someone!"

I paused for a moment to take in the information, and opened the book in front of me, flipping through the pages until I found the right one. It felt like Kyle was only asking because he didn't want me to feel I was being used, as if we were actually friends. I could almost appreciate the sentiment, and felt bad for turning him down, but had no interest in parties or "meeting someone".

"No thanks," I replied. "I'm busy on Friday."

Kyle looked like he wanted to say something else for a moment, but sank his shoulders. He knew better than to argue when I had made up my mind.



The hum of the bus filled my ears as I settled into my seat, the vehicle stirring and shifting until the crowd of people moved inside and the doors closed, and the bus took off. I leaned my head onto the window tiredly, and watched as the world whirred past.

"You ever hear what happened to my uncle Gavin?" A loud voice behind me asked, and another voice spoke in return.

"He was attacked by a bear, right?"

"No, even worse." The first person's voice seemed oddly excited. "He tells people that now, because no one believes him. He was actually attacked by a monster!"

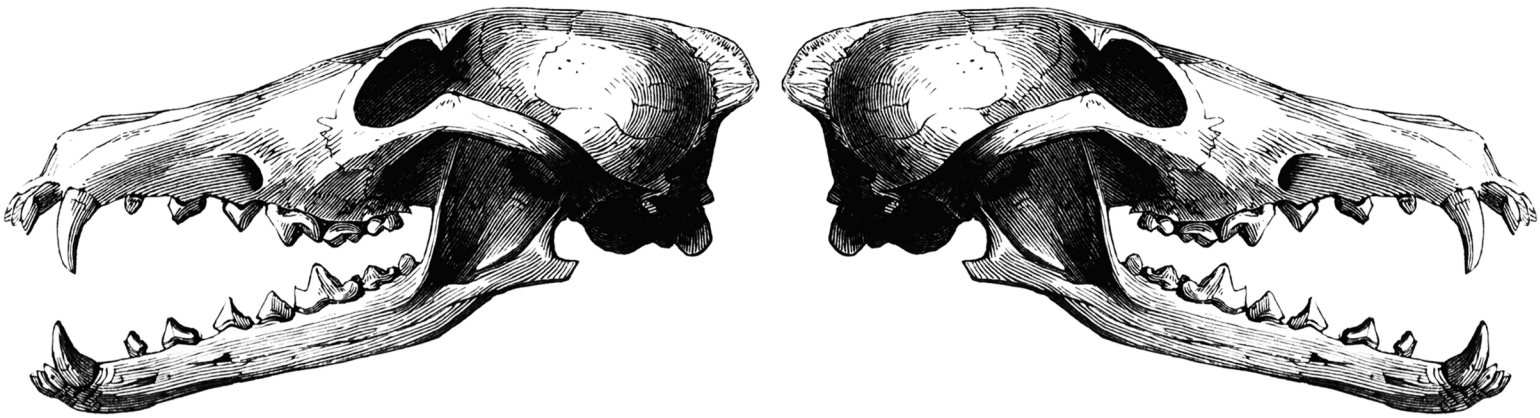
"What? …You mean, a bear?"

"Of course not! I would've said a 'bear' if that's what I meant. I mean, this creature wasn't anything we've ever seen before." The speaker was quite loud for someone telling such a personal story. He sounded a few seats behind me, but I could hear him clearly. The listener didn't seem to take it well, so he continued his tale.

"Gavin wouldn't lie about this kind of thing, he would've never even believed the stories of the forest being haunted if he hadn't seen the monster himself. Wasn't drunk or anything, just went too deep into the forest and was attacked by a giant creature. He says it was like a bear, but not really. And it wore some kind of necklace with bones for beads."

Rolling my eyes, I stuck my earbuds into my ears and turned up my music to drown out the conversation behind me. Since moving to this unfamiliar town, I'd heard stories of people having encounters with "monsters" and the forest being haunted by the ghosts of native tribes. But in all of the months I'd been here, I'd never come across such a thing. I'd seen a bear only once and heard the screams of foxes. It was only a bunch of college kids trying to scare each other with stories and pranks.

The thought of strangers desecrating the forest, searching for fairy tale monsters and ghost hunting, made me clench my teeth. It was enough to know that people hunted the forest animals for fun- not just for food. I'd nearly stepped on a couple of traps myself on my usual hikes, and couldn't camp in peace unless far from the city. I was always careful to not leave trash or any hints that humanity had entered the forest, in attempt to preserve the precious life, but I knew many others were not the same.

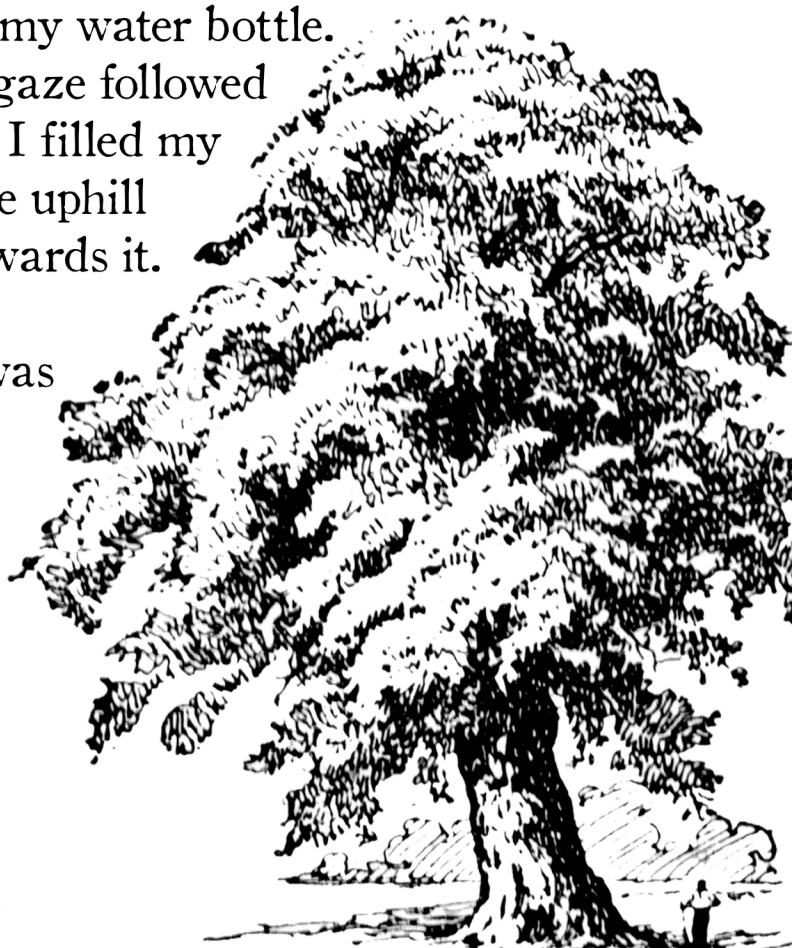


Mud squelched beneath my boots, leaving large prominent prints on the previously untouched ground, fallen orange leaves left pressed into the dirt. Birdsong filled the air, echoing through the towering trees. I gazed in awe at the dense woods surrounding me, farther into the forest than I had ever been before. I wasn't sure what drew me so far from home, from civilization. Maybe it was a strange homesickness for a place I'd never been, or maybe I was just tired of my usual life. I knew I shouldn't have been out so far this late, however- but I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. Right now, I just want to experience the forest in all its natural beauty, and forget my menial human life.

A bird flitted past my vision, and I continued deeper into the woods, lightly touching the rough bark of the trees as I passed. Sunlight filtered through the colorful leaves above, casting dancing shadows on the ground below. A squirrel darted up a tree, chattering angrily. I put one foot in front of another, taking my time to admire the world around me.

Before I knew it, I was even further into the forest, the trees taller than I'd ever seen before. Water rushed somewhere nearby, and I followed the sound, hoping to get a chance to refill my water bottle. I eventually came to a wide river. My gaze followed up the river to a roaring waterfall. As I filled my bottle, I noticed an unusually wide tree uphill near the waterfall. Curious, I drew towards it.

As I grew closer, I could see the tree was much bigger than any I'd ever seen in person, its branches twisting off in all directions. The branches formed a circle around the trunk, and when I looked below the tree, I noticed the rocks seemed to mirror it, forming an unusual barrier around the great tree.

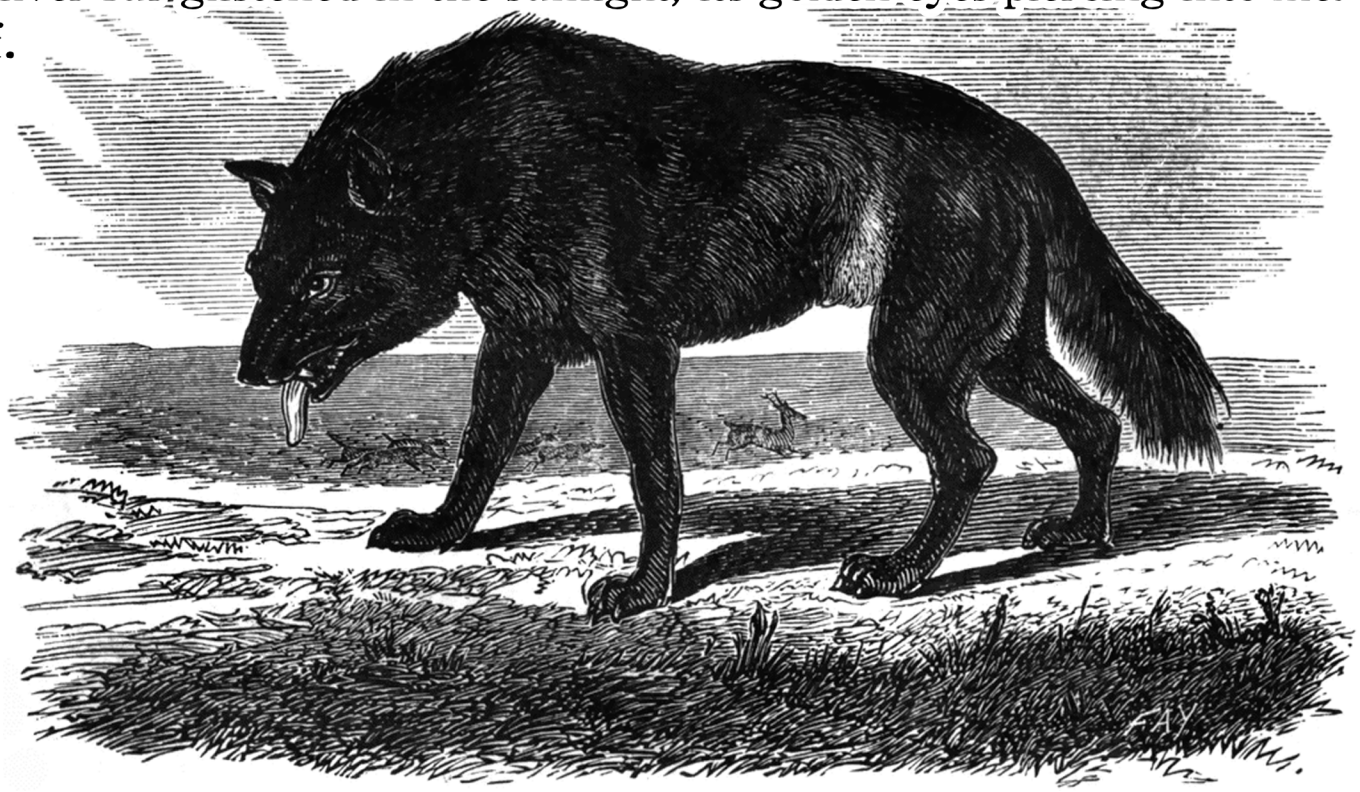


When I was close enough that the waterfall was deafening, I noticed little green husks among the leaves. I managed to climb up the hill and reach the tree. From where I stood, the waterfall suddenly seemed quiet. I gingerly stepped into the rocky circle and inspected the tree, concluding with excitement that it housed pecans. I loved pecans, and would take any chance to harvest them myself.

The birds grew quiet as a sudden strong wind swept over me. I ran my hand along the bark of a low branch, and peered at the ground to see many small brown shells. I carefully picked one up to look it over. I decided the nuts must be ripe, and began gathering them from the ground, brushing off most of the dirt and shoving them into my backpack. Once I'd gotten a fair amount, I slung my backpack over my shoulders and gazed up at the large tree in wonder.

A low growl cut through the silence. It was only then that I realized how quiet the world had grown. My body tensed, and my heart raced. A dog? I slowly turned to see a large set of teeth, merely a foot or two away from my face. It was a creature like a dog, standing ground over the rocks higher up on the hill. No, not a dog at all.

Its silver fur glistened in the sunlight, its golden eyes piercing into me. A wolf.



My entire body froze. I'd always dreamed of seeing wolves in person, I never expected to meet one like this. I was shaking from head to toe, but with my extensive knowledge of wolves from reading books about them instead of reading fiction as a child, I averted my gaze from the wolf towering above me, and slowly stepped back, drawing my hand to my backpack and reaching for a pack of jerky. This wolf was clearly upset at me for some reason, but I didn't want to pass up the chance to befriend it. This was my dream, after all.

I managed to shakily open the jerky and carefully extended my hand towards the wolf. However, the wolf didn't seem to like this, and let out a powerful snarl, snapping its jaws at me. I stumbled back in surprise, and soon my back was against the tree. The wolf leaped down, landing with grace. It drew closer, its ears pinned against its head and hackles raised, teeth glaring at me with a dangerous threat.

Thinking quickly, I turned and swung myself up into the tree. Running wasn't an option with wolves, so I had to escape another way. But I wasn't fast enough.

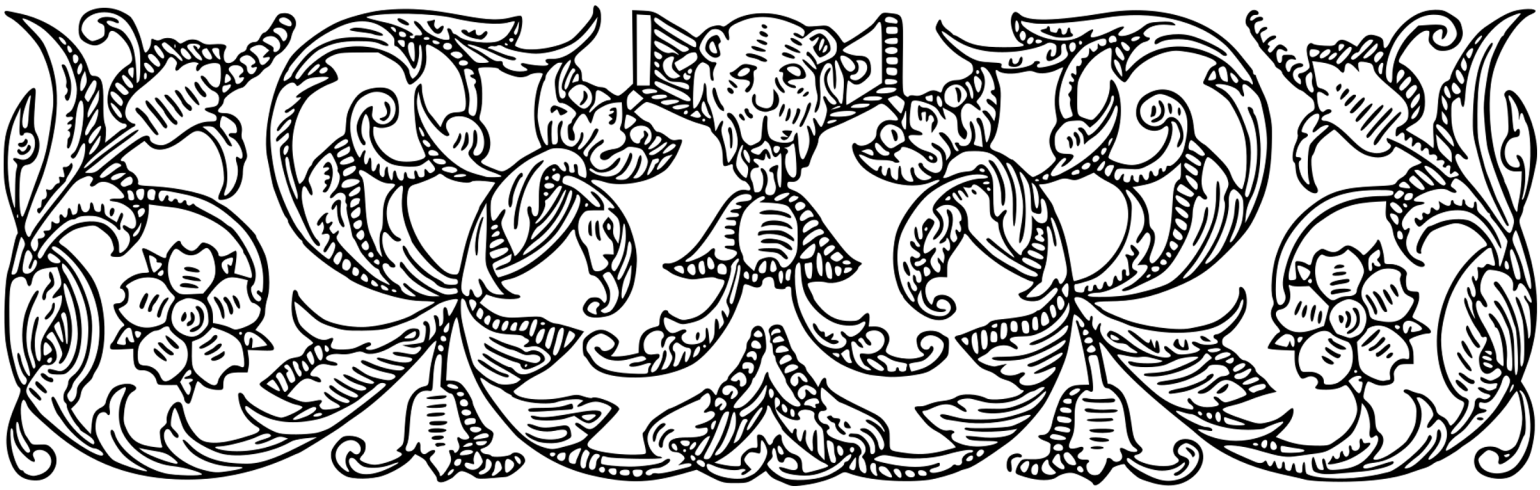
I cried out in pain as I felt teeth sink into my leg. I instinctively tried to pull away, but the wolf's powerful jaws held me tight like a metal trap. I fell onto a branch, huffing as the air was pushed out of my lungs. After what seemed like an eternity, the wolf's jaws released, and I quickly pulled my leg up and scrambled onto the branch. When I glanced back, the wolf was already darting away, disappearing behind boulders on the hill.

Tears welled in my eyes as I held my wounded leg. As I lifted the cuff of my jeans to expose the injury, I realized it didn't hurt quite as much as I expected. The wound wasn't too deep, and when I stretched out my leg, I felt it would be fine to walk on. I took a shaky breath and carefully slid off of the tree branch, wincing in pain as my injured leg touched the ground. Once I found my balance, the pain subsided enough to step forward.

As I stepped out from under the old tree, the sounds of the forest came back to me. I hadn't realized how quiet it was before. I glanced in the direction the wolf had gone, asking myself what the hell had just happened. It seemed so surreal, I was almost certain I imagined it. A wolf came out of nowhere and bit me, and then ran off? I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I should focus on getting home.

I hobbled painfully through the soon moonlit forest, the song of crickets echoing through my head. A twig snapped somewhere nearby, and I immediately froze, so quiet I could hear my own heartbeat. Nothing came of it, though, and I continued on through the soaring trees. I was suddenly aware of every little sound in the woods, from a stiff leaf settling onto the forest floor to insects whizzing past as I traveled. Trees creaked and eyes watched me from the shadows. It seemed the forest was angry at me.

I thought back to the wolf, and wondered what had made it bite me. I'd dreamed of meeting wolves in person since I was a young boy. I had a way with dogs, even the timidest of them seemed to like me. Being bitten by a wolf hurt more than physical pain. I felt rejected somehow. I'd had a chance to live out my dream of befriending a wild wolf, or otherwise having a positive encounter. But that didn't happen. I shook my head and told myself it was that I was too close to its den, or pups, or something. But there was something strange about that tree.



With a groan, I settled onto my bathroom floor, alcohol and bandages in hand. The bite had stopped bleeding, and left a trail of sticky crimson liquid down into my shoe. I gingerly took it off and wiped the dried blood from my leg. As I neared the wound itself with a towel soaked in alcohol, I winced in pain. It hurt more than I expected, and I paused, my hand hovering over the bite. I carefully pressed down again, clenching my teeth. I vigorously cleaned the wound, trying to get it over with as soon as possible, but it stung like hell and sent searing pain throughout my body. The wolf's fierce eyes flashed in my mind, its teeth glinting in the sunlight. Tears welled in my eyes again. It felt like I had been betrayed by a close friend.

When I lifted the towel from my leg, the wound was pulsing in pain. I wondered if I'd done something wrong, or if it was becoming infected, and poured more alcohol over it in a panic. I felt fire shoot through my veins, and reeled back, hitting my head on the wall. I cried out in pain and felt my head with my hand. The wound on my leg was still oddly painful, and when I looked down, I noticed it was extremely red. My breath caught in my throat. What the hell is happening?

I shakily attempted to bandage my leg, wincing at the slightest touch. It felt unusually hot and tender. Soon I was struggling for air and my vision grew blurry. My heart raced, it felt like something was very, very wrong. I struggled to stand, hoping to make it to my phone to either look up my symptoms to figure out what was wrong with me or, if it came to it, call an ambulance. But my legs collapsed underneath me, and I stumbled back onto the floor.

My whole body pulsed in pain, it was as if my skin was on fire. Every inch of my body ached and groaned. My heart felt like it was going to explode. I sank sadly to the floor, waiting for whatever this was to pass, but it only got worse.

I felt pins and needles throughout my skin, and my head pounded. My stomach churned, my bones felt as if they were snapping and moving places. I felt an enormous pressure around my skull, as if it was being crushed from all sides. My teeth ached and my jaw popped out of place. I reached out a hand towards the phone on my counter and watched as my skin changed color, fur shooting out like needles. My vision faded to black, and I was left writhing on the floor in immense pain and confusion.

Soon I could see again.

My body pulsed in pain, but not as badly as before. My senses came back to me one by one, in full force. Suddenly I could hear everything clearer, louder. I heard water rushing through the pipes, the hum of my computer in the other room, and the AC kick on, as if they were all next to me. The sounds made me wince, they felt so sharp in my ears. I could smell everything vividly too, even more than what I could sense with my ears. The rubbing alcohol filled my nose so strongly it brought tears to my eyes. I could smell everything else too, from the mud on my boots, the sweat on my clothes, the lingering odors of the bathroom. My apartment air had a distinct scent, of old wood, dust, and hot metal. I was overwhelmed with senses, and my head pulsed in response.

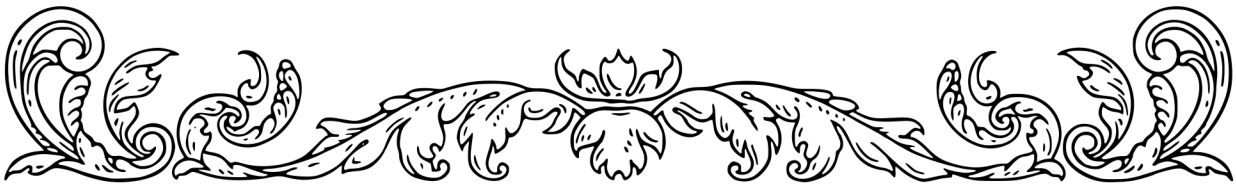
What's going on? Is this an adrenaline rush? I struggled to stand, my legs felt like noodles, and seemed to bend in odd ways, as if they were broken. Blood rushed to my head as I attempted to steady myself on my hands. My vision came into focus, and I peered down at a set of paws in front of me. Startled. I reared back, and the paws came with me. What the fuck…?



Panicked, I backed into the corner. I began to notice something in front of my face, and crossed my eyes to see it. A muzzle? I turned my head to see the rest of my misformed body. Or, is this really my body? What the hell is going on? The horror of my realization took over me, and for some reason, I bolted. I stumbled clumsily out the door in my strange new body, my mind racing at a speed I'd never thought it could reach. I was certain I was hallucinating somehow, or that something was very wrong.

My paws thudded on the creaking wooden floor, and I winced at the piercing sound in my sensitive ears. My body felt horribly hot and stuffy. I raced to the nearest window, knocking over miscellaneous things as I ran. I pawed ungracefully at the window. I couldn't seem to remember how to work my body, or open a window, and whined pitifully. I was surprised at the sound that had come out of my mouth, and stumbled back, tumbling off of my bed.

I wasn't sure how long I stayed in this odd form, running around my apartment like a headless chicken, before I eventually passed out on the floor.



I slowly opened my eyes and groaned out in pain. I had a splitting headache and every inch of my body screamed, feeling sore to my very bones. I could hardly move. My clothes hung loosely off of my body, torn to shreds or fallen down. For a moment, I pondered if I was sick, or what happened to my body that made it so painful. Then the events from the previous night came back to me.

Convinced it was just a dream and that I was overreacting, I pushed myself off of the floor. Wait- why am I on the floor? I peered down at my hands and breathed a sigh of relief. I could hardly lift myself up, but at least I wasn't hallucinating anymore, and had normal human hands again. I managed to pull my delicate body into a sitting position and rubbed my forehead.

As my vision came back into focus, I glanced around my room. It was in total disarray. Couch cushions and pillows were thrown all around, one of them torn and covered in mud. Pictures were flung from walls, and miscellaneous glass shattered onto the floor. My basil plant had fallen from its stand, the pot in pieces and the plant unearthed and lying sadly on the ground. But what shocked me the most- paw prints littered the wooden floor.

I shook my head and moved towards the couch, ignoring the paw prints and beginning to pick up the strewn about pillows. But when I looked closely at one, I noticed strands of hair in an odd pattern. Some were brown, some white, and some a mix. I could've passed off the brown hairs as my own, maybe, but the white hairs definitely didn't come from me.

Settling my back against the couch, I wondered if it was really possible. What other explanation was there? I had a dream about turning into a wolf, woke up to see paw prints and fur around my apartment. Can I really play this off as just a coincidence, a dog broke into my house and caused this the same night I had that weird dream? It just... seems too good to be true.

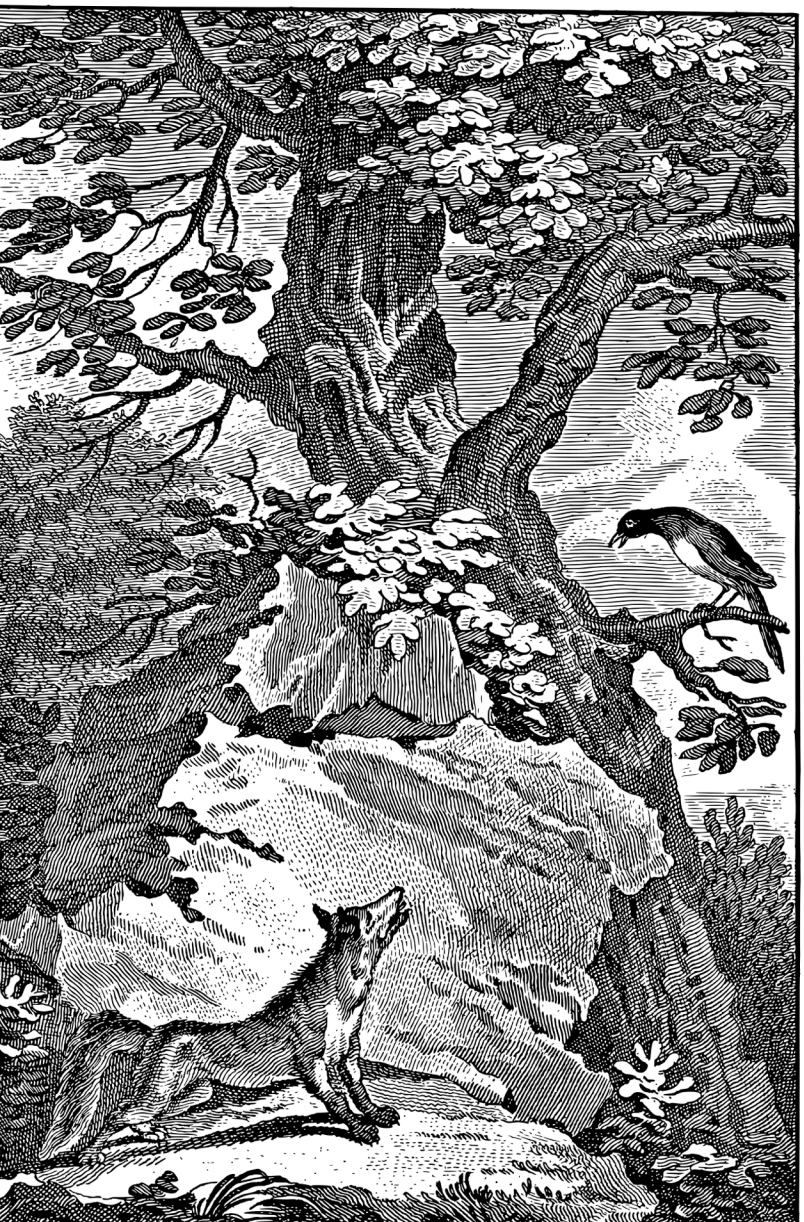
Letting out a heavy sigh, I decided I wouldn't think about it any longer, and simply do something. I had to prove to myself that I was really a werewolf. I left my home in its messy state, and drove out to the deepest parts of the woods I could reach by wheels.

Birdsong filled the air as I reached a clearing in the woods. My body didn't ache as much and my head no longer hurt. I settled into a patch of grass and leaves, hearing them crunch beneath me. I closed my eyes for a moment, then remembered- if I was going to shapeshift, would my clothes tear off again? It seemed I didn't become bigger but my human clothes merely wouldn't suit a wolf body. I hesitated, but removed my clothes, figuring no one would happen to come across me this far out into the woods. Still, I laid my shirt into my lap for some decency and warmth.

Closing my eyes, the world around me changed. Without vision, I focused more easily on the sounds and smells that reached me. It wasn't anything like my wolf form, but it seemed my senses were stronger than before. I could hear a mouse rustling through the leaves nearby, and a woodpecker striking a tree nearby. Taking in a deep breath, the scents of cool forest air and earthiness filled my lungs. My heart slowed and my body relaxed.

I sat waiting for the transformation, but nothing happened. It seemed meditating wasn't the right way to trigger it, so I thought back to last night. It started after trying to clean my wound, but I didn't want to hurt myself if there could be another solution.

Falling back into the grass, I let out a sigh. I wasn't sure what prompted my next idea, but it seemed like it just might work. I closed my eyes again, and this time, imagined myself as a wolf.



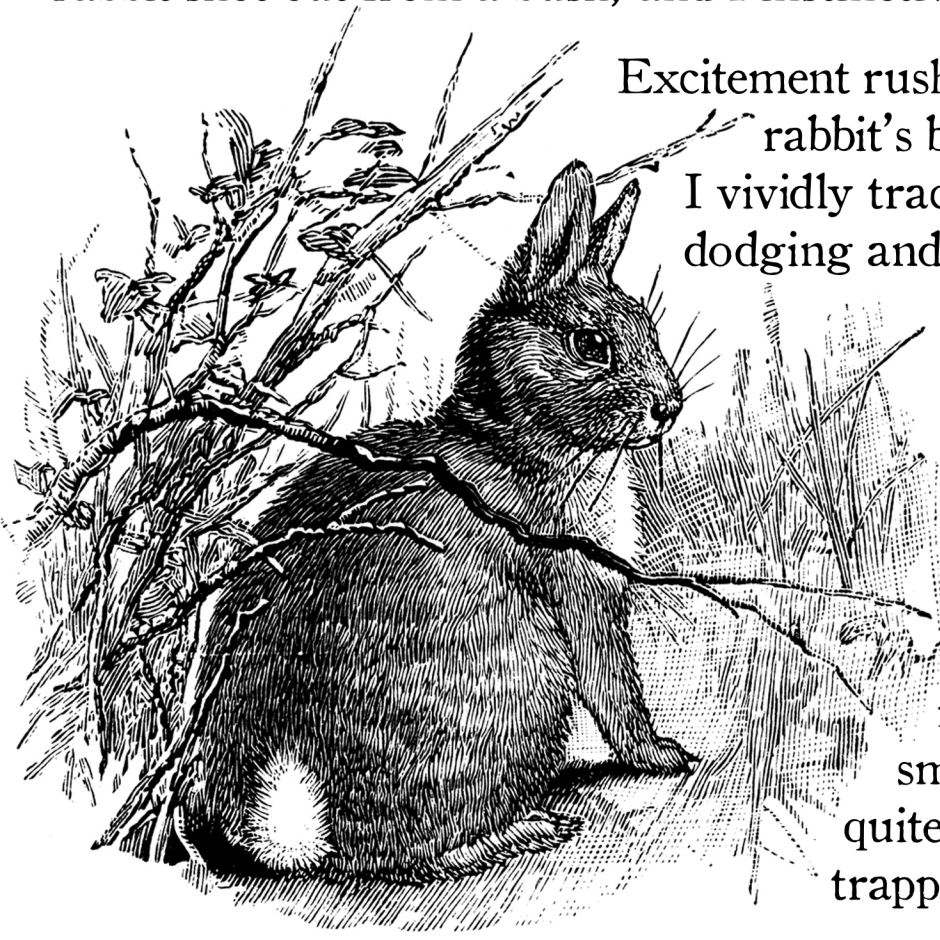
In my head, I imagined myself through the eyes of a wolf, seeing the white muzzle in front of my face when I crossed my eyes, and my large paws. I looked over my body, flexing my legs to get the feel of them and wagging my tail. Then, I lifted my head and howled. Blood rushed through me. Something about it felt so natural, so right, like I was born to do this. To be a wolf.

My eyes shot open, and I quickly sat up, cupping my hands around my mouth and letting out a howl as long as I could hold it. My head vibrated with the sound, my song rising through the trees. Birds scattered and the forest seemed to pause to listen. It was as if I'd been holding it in my entire life.

My body soon grew hot, but not uncomfortably so. I moved forward to rest my front paws into the grass, shaking my head until it grew fur and a muzzle. The transformation was fluid, as if I'd done it a million times, and soon I was fully a wolf.

I leaped forward in my new body, racing through the clearing, the colorful range of scents of the forest filling my nose. I ran through the trees, my paws barely touching the earthy ground, until I was out of breath and panting. My tongue lolled out of my mouth and left drops of saliva on the dry leaves below. I was quickly overheated, but with so much adrenaline rushing through me, I didn't care.

Taking a moment to breathe, I peered around at the woods. I'd never been in this section of the woods before, but before I could really take in the scenery, my ears perked at a nearby rustling. My body went on alert, and I stepped carefully, silently, towards the source of the sound, my tail rigid and my ears twitching. I leaned forward, inhaling a strange scent I could only describe as "animal", although I knew it was very distinct. The rustling stopped for a moment, and I froze. After a moment, a little brown rabbit shot out from a bush, and I instinctively sprinted.



Excitement rushed through my body. The rabbit's body blurred in front of me but I vividly traced its scent through the trees, dodging and weaving through bushes and branches and rocks, my paws pushing me forward, faster than I ever thought was possible. Eventually the rabbit darted into a hole, and I reached it only a split second after, shoving my muzzle inside eagerly. The rabbit smelled so close, but I couldn't quite reach it. I knew it was trapped.

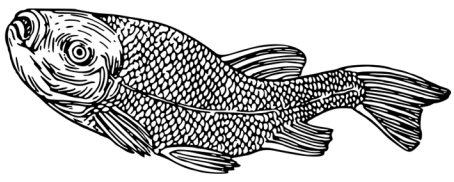
A paw hovered over the den, ready to dig the rabbit out, but I stopped myself. I shook my head, letting my tongue flop out of my mouth and sat, panting heavily. Though the chase was exhilarating, the thought of hurting an animal when I didn't need to made me stop. I mentally apologized to the poor rabbit I'd terrorized, and trotted off towards the sound of water running nearby.

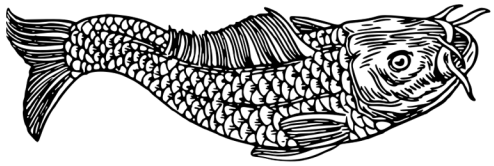
I lapped at the cool refreshing river, and paused to see my reflection in the water. My fur was brownish-gray and white, and my eyes were a bright golden yellow. I remembered the face of the wolf who had bit me, and thought I looked a little like them. We had the same broad muzzle and eye shape and fur length. Maybe that's what happens when you're turned into a werewolf- you become the same subspecies as them.

Licking the stray water from my muzzle, I glanced around, and decided to settle myself into a shady spot under a large tree. I curled up, covering my cold nose with my bushy tail, and sighed happily. I wasn't sure what I expected about becoming a werewolf, but this was the happiest day of my life. Somehow, all of this felt right. I felt complete.

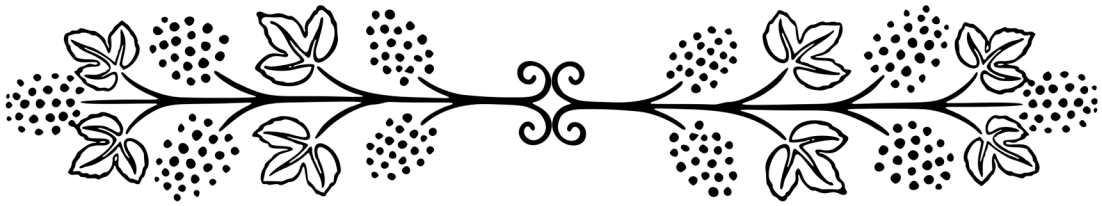


After a moment of lying in the shade in peace, I remembered my pile of clothes I'd left in the clearing, and sprinted back. It was surprisingly easy to retrace my steps; I knew my own scent by then and could follow it all the way back to the clearing.





With a big yawn, stretching my jaw open as far as I could, I plopped into the grass next to my clothes. I wasn't sure how to change back into my human form, and didn't have the energy to think about it, and instead lazily settled my head onto my paws and closed my eyes. The songs of birds and insects rang pleasantly through my ears as I drifted off.



Awakening to the sound of a woodpecker, my eyes shot open, confused for a moment. Remembering where I was, I rolled to face the sky, shielding my sensitive eyes from the sun in the middle of the sky. I let out a happy sigh and relaxed for a moment. The grass was itchy on my bare skin and I began to shiver, so I stretched myself awake and quickly got back into my clothes.

I stood in the clearing, pondering whether I should go home, or stay in the forest. No, the forest feels more like home. I didn't want to leave. I turned and decided to travel deeper into the forest. Soon I found myself on a familiar trail- the one I'd gone on yesterday. I wasn't sure why I felt compelled to go back to the tree I'd seen yesterday, it was like my feet carried me there on their own.

Once the tree was in my line of sight, the waterfall deafening the rest of the forest, I paused. I glanced around, not sure what I was looking for, but vaguely feeling like I was being watched. Something rustled behind me, and I swiftly turned to see a sharp blade pointed at my face.

"Welcome back," an oddly familiar voice spoke to me. I peered beyond the spear to see a set of distinctive fierce brown eyes. Though they were a different color, I recognized them easily. These eyes belonged to a strong girl, her dark skin glittering in the sunlight. She was dressed like someone certainly not from modern civilization, clothed in animal hides and decorated in bones. My mind whirled, my emotions mixed. I began to open my mouth to speak, and she quickly silenced me.

"I didn't give you permission to speak, human." Her words sliced through me. "Now, have you learned your lesson? Stop messing with nature, and don't go near the Sacred Tree."

I nodded frantically. "I'm really sorry! I didn't know any better."

The wolf girl's expression softened and she lowered her weapon. "Well, you're lucky all I did was turn you. The others wouldn't be so forgiving." Her mention of "the others" sparked curiosity in me. Did she live with other werewolves?

"Now," she continued, fastening her spear to her back. "Are you ready for the curse to be lifted?"

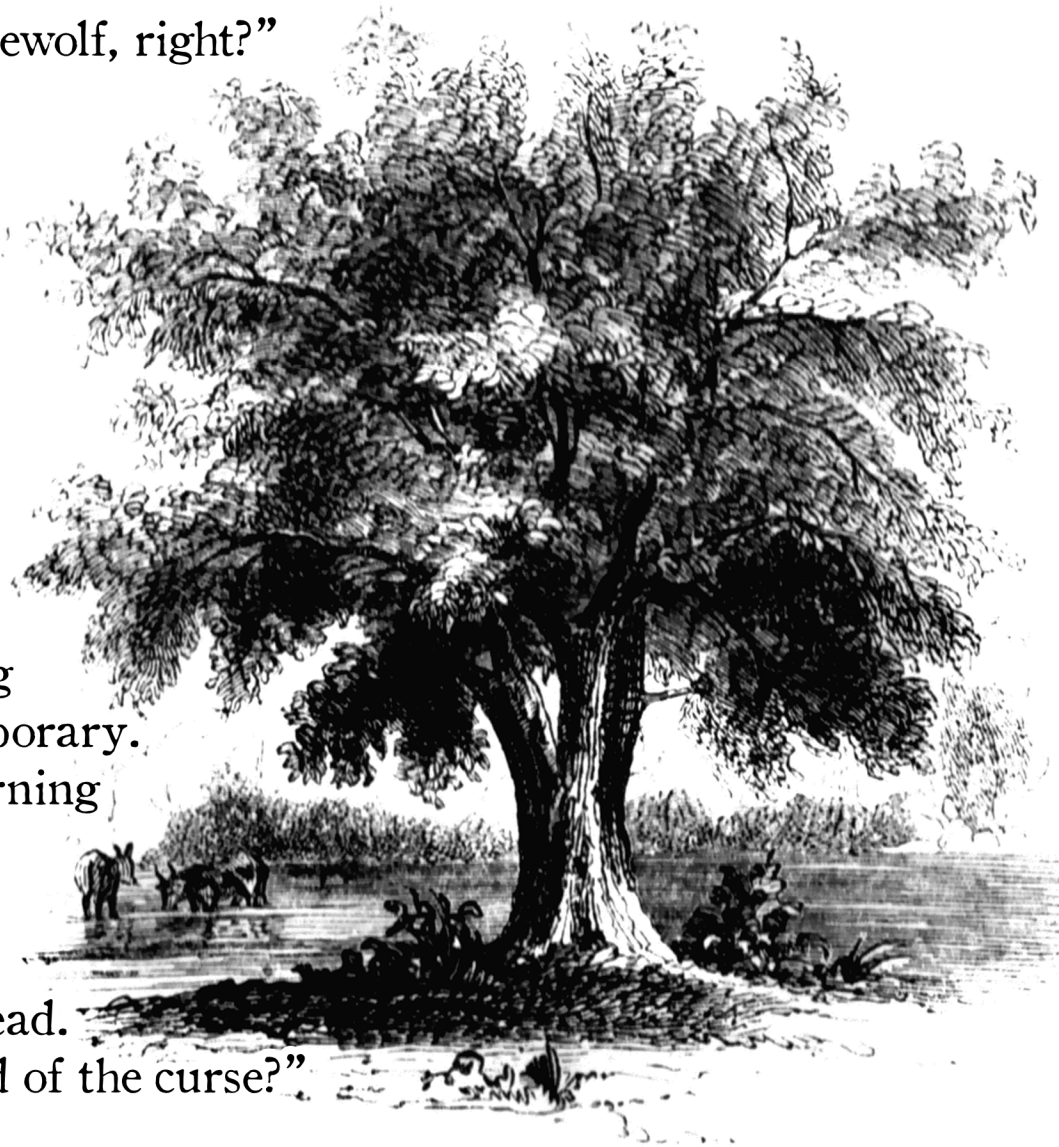
I gave her a look of confusion. "Curse?"

"...You did become a werewolf, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, then I'll turn you back into a human and you can go back to living your life."

"What?" I asked, perplexed. It never occurred to me that being a werewolf was only temporary. I didn't think about returning to being a human, and didn't want to.



The wolf girl tilted her head. "Don't you want to be rid of the curse?"

I shook my head slowly. “Why would I want to be human?”

Settling back on her feet, she looked just as confused as I was. “I’ve never met someone who was born human and wanted to be a werewolf. You know, being a werewolf isn’t easy. It doesn’t give you super strength or make you inherently better than humans, you’re just a human and wolf. Your first transformations will be painful and you’ll take a long time to get used to your new body. And.. good luck learning how to control them. Natural werewolves have their whole lives to learn how to be a wolf.”

“I don’t care,” I blurted out. “I don’t want to go back. I want to be a wolf.”

“...What? Why?”

Tears welled in my eyes. I sunk to my knees, bowing my head. “Please don’t turn me back into a human.” The thought of never feeling the ground racing beneath my paws, or smelling every scent of the forest at once and being able to mentally map out the entire area by smell, or not being able to taste the fresh river water on my tongue ever again was painful. Being human was alright, but- being a wolf was better. I’d never wanted anything more in my entire life. I wasn’t sure what exactly made me want it so much, but I knew I’d never be satisfied in life knowing I could’ve been a wolf, and wasn’t.

“Alright,” the girl spoke softly, and when I looked up, she reached out a hand to me. I hesitated for a moment, and took it. She lifted me up with ease, and I almost fell into her, trying to steady myself. “I’ll take you to my pack and they’ll decide whether or not you can be one of us.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, feeling tears stinging my eyes. I quickly wiped my face, and followed her towards the mountain.

“My name’s Lou, by the way,” she called after me as we neared the roaring waterfall.

“I’m Daniel,” I replied. Curious, I asked what was on my mind. “So you live in a pack?”

Lou nodded, reaching the waterfall and squeezing behind it into a hidden cave. I followed, and once we were both inside the damp musky cave, she explained. “We’re a bunch of werewolves who have found each other long ago. Some are natives here, some are from other places, even other countries. There are few places where we can live in peace anymore, so where we can live, we live in numbers. It’s not so natural for wolves, or werewolves, to live in such big villages, but it’s what we have to do to survive.”

I glanced around the dim tunnel, barely able to make out Lou’s shape in the darkness, taking in the information and the environment. We made our way down one fork in the path, and another, until light began to filter in, bouncing off of the rocky walls. Soon we were outside again- in a completely different area. All around us were mountains reaching into the sky, and trees as far as the eye could see. Lou gestured for me to follow, and after a moment of taking in the view, I joined her, another question coming to my mind.

“Am I going to join your pack?” I almost felt stupid for asking. Was it like asking to join someone’s family?

Lou shrugged. “Dunno, depends on the leaders. If you’re going to be a werewolf, it’s extremely difficult to learn how to be a wolf and navigate your own body and the difficulties that come with being a werewolf all on your own. So the best option would be for you to join a pack or have some werewolf teach you. I’m no teacher myself, and don’t know anyone who’d take up that kind of job if you weren’t in our pack.”

I fell silent. I was lucky enough to be bitten, but my struggles weren't over. Now I'd have to prove myself to the pack leaders.

After a while of traveling through dense trees and damp caves, we reached a large village bustling with life. It was very reminiscent of human towns, but slightly off. The houses were mostly small wooden cottages, some homes even built out of large trees. They were adorned with various animal skulls, hides, fur, and bones. Many houses had flower gardens or vegetable gardens around them, more flowers growing here and there throughout the village. The scents of cooking meat hung heavy in the area, making my mouth water. People, wolves, and odd hybrids roamed the streets, kids and pups playing in their backyards, and older members gathered together not far beyond. The people and wolves were a large variety- the wolves ranging from black, white, red, gray, and brown coats, and the humans just as varied. But, watching them change from wolf to human, and human to wolf, I realized they weren't really "wolves and humans"; they were all werewolves.



Some of them paused to stare at me, the ones in wolf form glaring at me with piercing eyes, hackles raised. I moved behind Lou, quickening my pace while she lead me through the village of cautious people to a tall building in the center. It was decorated in more animal parts and plants than any neighboring building, and seemed important. Lou carefully opened a large door and I followed in after her, peering around the great hall. Windows rose from the floor to the ceiling, allowing in glaring sunlight. The building was almost churchlike, but more natural, the walls completely wooden and everything decorated with some piece from nature, anything from rocks to bones to plants. The hall smelled of a distinct scent I easily recognized- the scent of wolves.

"Who is this?" A curious voice croaked, and as we rounded a pillar, an elderly woman garnished in bones came into view. Though she looked frail, her eyes were even more fierce than Lou's. I felt as if she was seeing into my soul, and shifted uncomfortably.

"He's the man I cursed yesterday," Lou explained, scratching the back of her neck nervously. "He, well... wants to stay a werewolf."

The old woman's expression drew curious. "Why?" She turned to me, asking me directly, ignoring Lou. "Why do you want to be one of us?"

I dropped my gaze, my heart pounding. I knew I had to word it correctly, to make her believe me. But I wasn't even sure what I was experiencing myself. "I don't know," I muttered. "It just... feels right"

Her old green eyes narrowed at me for a moment, but as I was about to open my mouth and explain further, her body relaxed. "You have a wolf soul, don't you?"

I froze. Wolf soul? I didn't even need to think about it- I knew, deep down, that it was true. I felt like I'd known all my life, but didn't know how to put it into words.

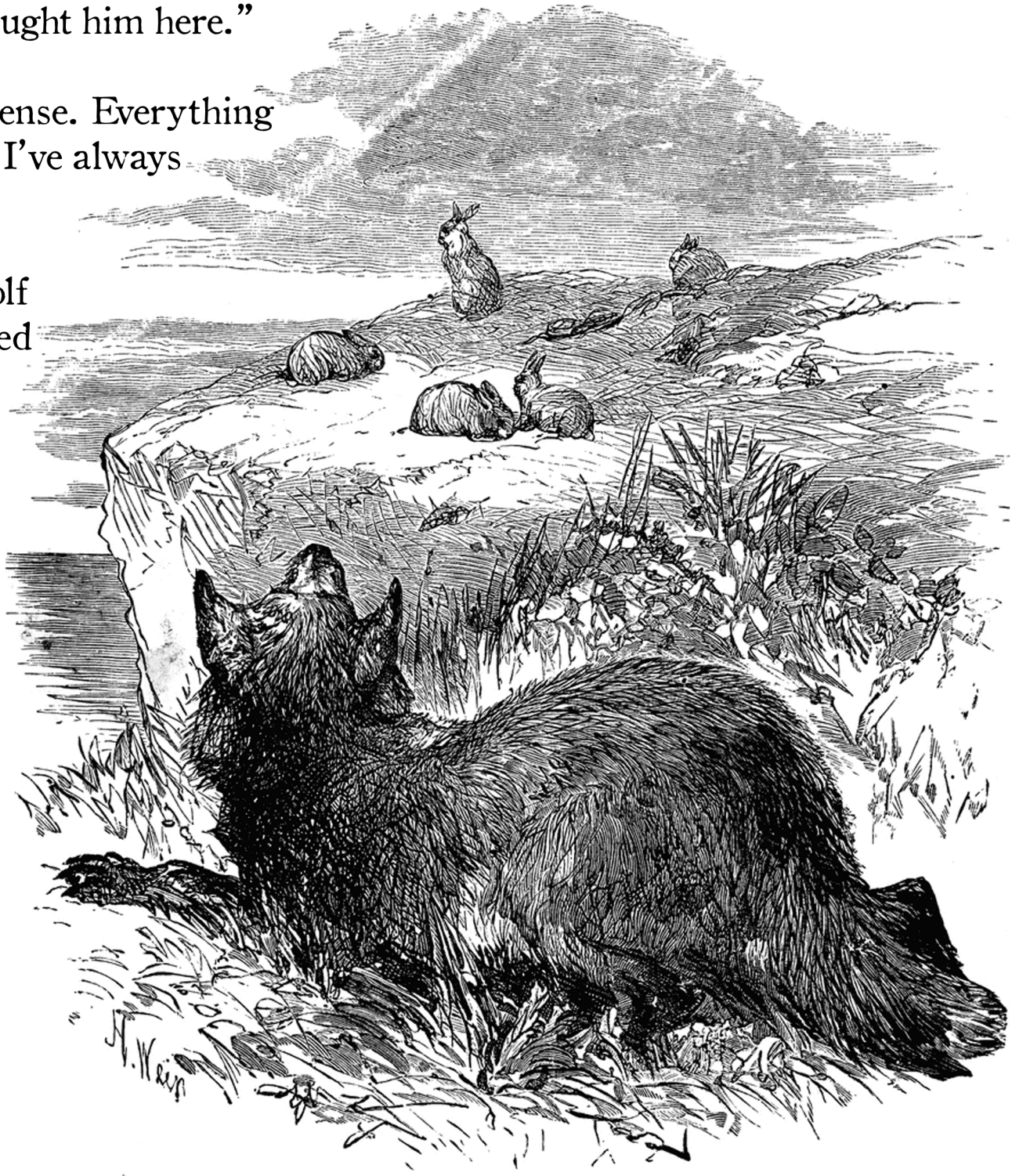
My reaction was enough for her, and she grinned. “It’s been a while since I met someone like you.”

“Wolf soul?” Lou pondered.

“Sometimes a wolf breaks the cycle,” the elder explained, “and instead of going into another wolf body when they die, they’re put into the body of a human. Can’t you sense it? He feels like a wolf. No one who is cursed by a bite ever becomes a true werewolf like us, unless they have the soul of a wolf within them. He was never human. He’s always been a wolf. It was fate that brought him here.”

It all made sense. Everything just clicked. I’ve always been a wolf.

The elder wolf woman smiled softly. “Welcome to the pack, old friend.”



Fanacht ar Maidin

...the wait for morning forever long.



By Pale M. L. Greenwood

The sky was twilit above him, clouds encircling the horizon in a myriad of lavender and orange, spanning the shades of sunrise and sundown. They cupped themselves around the sun and the moon like altars, each holding the horizon close, opposites and somehow identical. One would lower and one would rise, and that was the way of things. It didn't matter which it would be, the future would play out regardless. He waded through the hip-tall grass, hands relaxed at his sides and drifting through the dampened brush. His lungs seemed to grow bigger with every passing breath, not winded but waking with the effort of striding through the moor.

His heart beat, faint but steady, relaxed in the knowledge he was where he needed to be. So much had changed. He remembered every footfall, every rise and lowering of the rolling hills. Nothing was the same, but he knew these steps. He might have said his blood remembered, something vital and moving and pumping through him that had always been there. He might have said that, if he hadn't known better. Even forgotten and left to shadows, the light remembered, and so few magicks wouldn't glow in the dark.

Somewhere around here, high up on a cliff leading to a very strange-looking karst would be soil once and never again disturbed. Somewhere around here, his blood remembered falling to the soil, drinking up the ashes. If he had learned anything at all about gardening, it was that ash and blood made for excellent fertilizer. Anything, when left alone with a little bit of nourishment, will return to bloom. He wasn't sure he could say the same for himself.

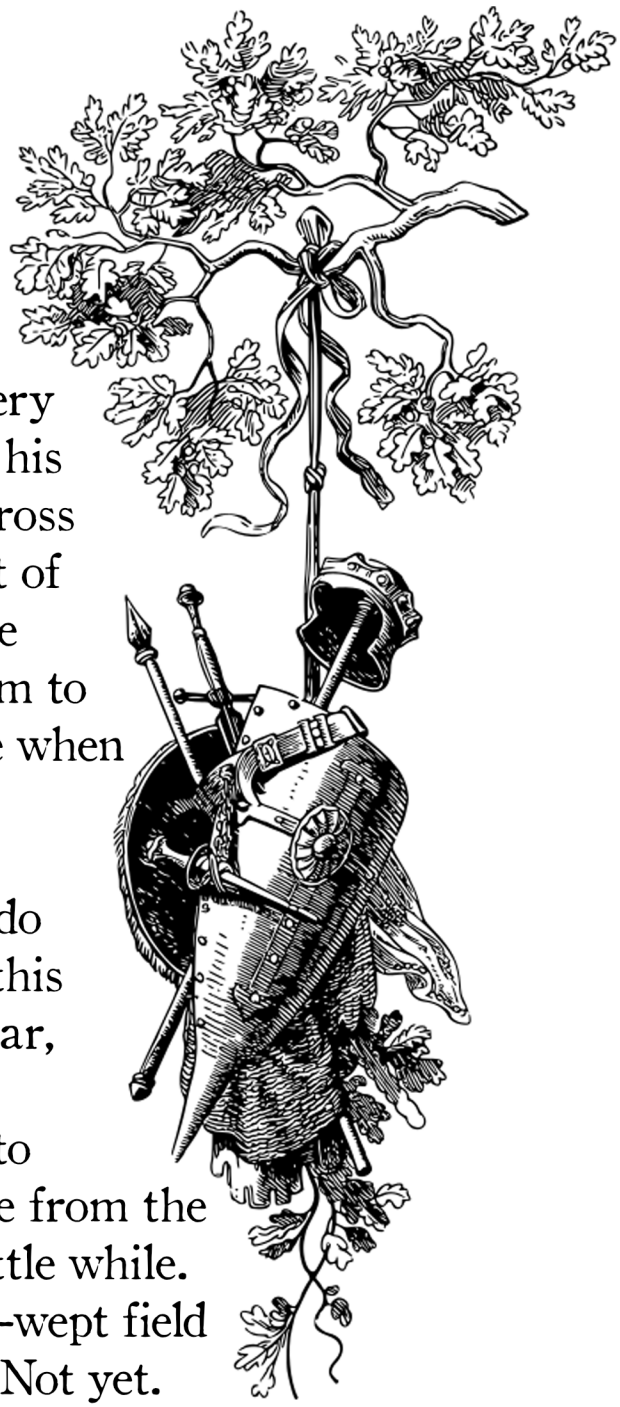
The wilds around him were a myriad of colours, paled by the hazy, dew-wept mist, but still a rainbow under the chill of the dual alpenglow of the sky. So many monsters had fought against the light here. It was no wonder the plains shone like stained glass. He winced at the comparison as he walked, the grass weaving back into place behind him, covering his tracks, as if he had never been here at all. He had been here, once, or somewhere very much like here, identical but opposite in all the ways that marked a family. He had stopped the long torment of the land, and here, the land remembered. It would cover his footsteps, leave the wilds undisturbed a little longer.

It had been aeons. It had been five years. It had been twenty-one, and it had been a moment, and he didn't know how he ever could have left his windswept home. At least the sky was alight with moon and sun, and not lightning and pyroclastic clouds. That had to count for something, although he wondered what died when its source of electricity faded because of his actions.

He had long since tired of killing, and there was one more murder he would need to commit. Fire and ash in so many ways. One more murder that needed to happen, if the world was to be thanked for keeping the twin graves safe all these years. He wondered, vaguely, what might be left. If flowers bloomed from the ashes of this land, then what had the land and life made of what he'd buried here? The last time he had been a true creature of life and the green, it had been forced upon him. Words fall and are forgotten, except for when they're bound to bone, and it had taken him far too long to breathe in and cut his own flesh back enough to remember.

Even before ashes, even before the flames, he had been a creature gowned in green. There had been a moment when those had all been the same. It was only his when he was the one calling it to bloom, and it was his again, and there was no need to call it to him. No further need to be what had been demanded of him. No further need to lie.

He closed his eyes a brief, blissful moment, and drew in a breath of misty dew and gentle flowers. These were nothing like the ones that had followed in his wake, once upon a blook-soaked story. These were nothing but flowers that had existed since the dawn of man, waiting for wind and wave and world's keeper alike. His world was long, long behind him now, and if he ever remembered it as home, then it would split his heart in two, leave his home in two different worlds that would never recognize each other past the barest of bones.



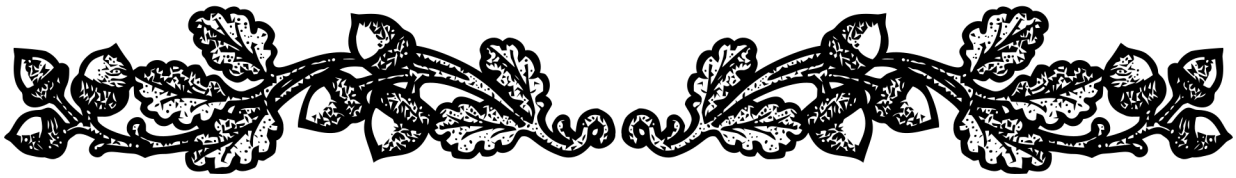
It was telling, then, that they mirrored each other. Telling enough to take twin graves and mourn them both, all over again. He walked onward, across the vast, dew-wept moor, and breathed. His steps grew longer, not rushing, not running, but longer with every stride. His lungs woke with the twilit breeze, his eyes filtering the colours of gold and silver across the plain. The blue of morning, and the violet of nightfall. There was a time when seeing those colours twinned in the sky was enough for him to fall to his knees screaming. There was a time when only fire would hold them at bay.

To burn this land in the here and now would do nothing but leave scars down to the bone. If this were to burn at all, it would be later in the year, flowers wilted and brush cloaking itself in its autumn gown, ready to die for the new year to awaken all over again. If the moon were gone from the sky, cloaked in a shadow of the world for a little while. There would be burning here yet, in this dew-wept field so impossible to recognize fire. But not now. Not yet. Everything would die eventually, but just for the moment, for an eternity, the land was alive, and he was alive with it.

The parts of him that felt soft to the touch were shifting, shape-changing, hardening in the wind and taking on a mirror's angle to what had originally grown here. The parts of him that were already angular and sharp ached to be here, knowing to the core what had been lost. They had kindness enough not to cut at his surroundings. They had always cut before, and now, now they were holding back. Now, they fit in the jigsaw of his surroundings. Now, they remembered in a way that didn't leave him maddened and weeping for a home that he'd lost.

It had taken him so long to get here. It hadn't taken him nearly long enough. If he stripped the flesh from his bones and displayed the scars carved into them to the land, they would still be fresh. If he had waited long enough to go back, to come here, to a place he remembered but had never really been to, the scars would have healed.

They never would have truly healed, no matter how long he stayed away. He was only ever going to heal by being here and seeing what the world had made in sympathy of what he'd buried here. He had never been here before. He had not been here since the death of his mother, since the death of himself, since someone who would dream his father into existence had left this place. He was here, now. He wasn't sure if he could ever ask of himself to leave.



A pair of pale hands pushed into the muddy, loamy soil, staining it with brown, pulling a healthy tan from his skin, bleaching golden into silver. There was a time when he had compared the gold for a shimmering fantasy, and the silver to a chromatic, broken reality. They were one, now. Blue and violet skies mixing into a sorrow of grief, gold and silver tears staining a pair of shape-changing, hardening hands. He allowed them to sink into the soil, easy now, feeling the water that had never been there before.



It had been only tears that had come to this, aquifer and rain-soaked fields and dew-wept dreams, an archeologist's history of memory between wet topsoil and drier subsoil. Eventually, before meeting rock, his hands would find a layer of ash, deep and blood-soaked and lightning-sung. A layer of ash so fresh, and so old, and he would never be able to say exactly when it had fallen like snow, like tears, from the sky. But a dual murder had been committed here, and he had been here when it happened, and he had committed it. A murder for each heavenly object in the sky, a murder for each home he had wandered through the hills and once forsaken.

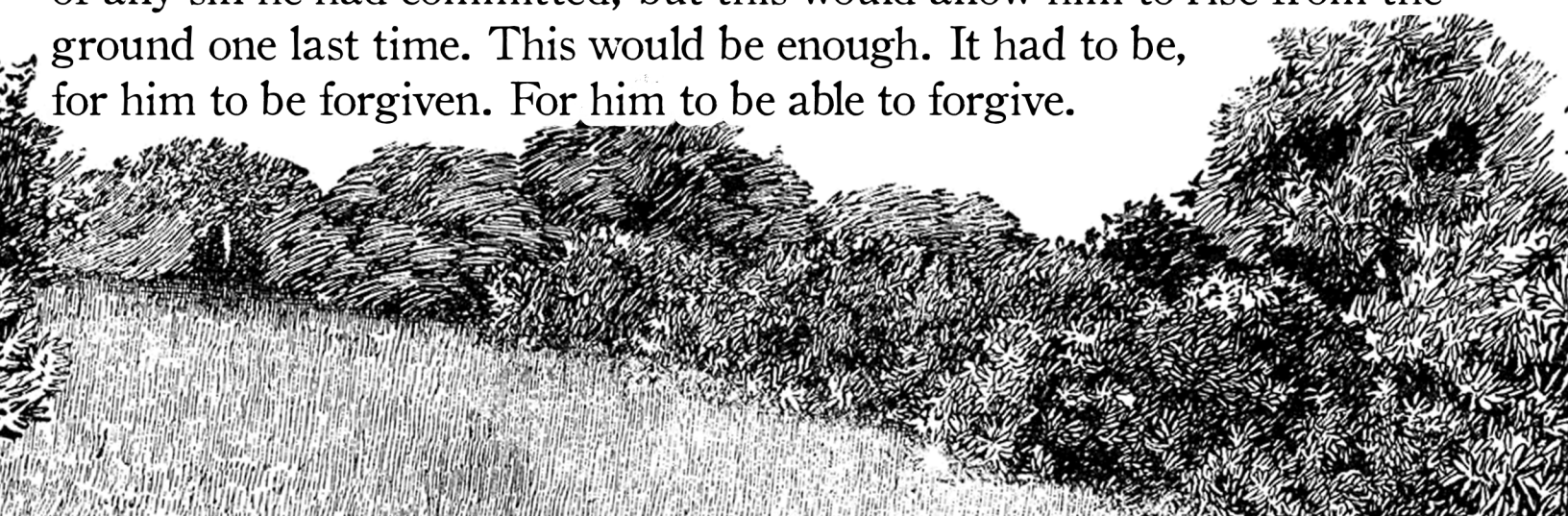
He was here, now. His hands reached deep into the subsoil, reaching for the ash, reaching for the memories. Feeling his hands shift angular, fingers extending, skin growing more malleable with the faintest fizzle of pressure and prowess. His hands remembered. He remembered. Words and sins carved on bone and left to the safe possession of a person who believed himself to be human. He'd figured out the truth a long time ago. He'd found the carvings on his bones a long time ago, too. It had still taken him ever-so-long to find his way to here, find his way back here, trust that the future was forgiving enough to let him commit one murder more.

His hands sunk into the soil, eyes closed against the dual-lit sky, reaching for the cinders. Maybe they would still be burning. Maybe they would be long dead. Maybe they would have lain quiet and unsinged, and when he withdrew his hands for the last time from the earth, they would burst again into flame at the sight of the sky. For once, he could not have said. It was rare indeed, that he could not have said. Even back then, it was rare that he could not have said. The future had been knowable, then, save for when someone died. Some deaths were preventable. Some were guaranteed no matter what he did or what chord the chaos sang.

The cinders brushed his fingertips and he leaned toward the ground, nose to the soil, breathing in the ivy and heather's silken scent. Pushing his arms elbow-deep into the loam, reaching farther, further back in time, closing his eyes against the dew. His fingertips brushed something hardened, something cold, something still sleeping. The ash around his fingers warmed as he pushed it aside, reaching, until finally he could cup his palms around the object he'd buried somewhere far from here, and maybe here all this time, ever so long ago. When he withdrew, wet soil like blood slicked him from the elbows down, the dew dampening the tips of his dark brown hair.

He cupped his hands before him, damp with soil, damp with blood, damp with tears. The hard, chilled object that rested in his palms was red, and glittered faintly, underneath a layer of ash and dust. He had never seen anything so brilliantly red, ruby dipped in a blood-cherry finish. It wasn't broken. If nothing could surprise him more, the jewel in his hands wasn't broken. He had been broken for so long. He couldn't bear to take his eyes off of it, but he had no other choice, and he closed them anyway to take a breath as deep as he could, as deep as the moors, as deep as a half-remembered dual murder.

He held the jewel in one hand and slipped his other hand to the left side of his chest. Here was a murder almost as difficult as the first. He had ended everything, then, stopped a dream millennia in the making, shut the curtains on the beginning of the world. Now… This would make everything better. This would bring it all back. This wouldn't absolve him of any sin he had committed, but this would allow him to rise from the ground one last time. This would be enough. It had to be, for him to be forgiven. For him to be able to forgive.



Skin parted like so many dead leaves and cobwebs as his hand opened an old scar, once left forgotten when the mystery of its arrival refused to be solved. Blood gushed from the wound, and he didn't notice, and he reopened a wound that had never really healed, ached in the middle of the night and whenever blue and violet lights shimmered across the sky. He opened his chest, and pushed the jewel back into place, in the empty cavity he'd made of himself so long ago.

In order to grow, one sheds the form they held before. In order to survive, one kills the person they once were. He was not performing a resurrection, he was not casting an act of necromagy to bring back what once he'd slaughtered. Time runs only forward, though it loops on occasion. He did not stand outside of time, and the scar would remain across his chest, a reminder of what once he had been. Of what once would never come again.

He did not blame his father for running. For never looking back. He only wished they both had been able to hold their names high. They had lost them, lost them with language and with distance and with death. He wasn't sure what his own name had been. But the wind picked up as the jewel inside his chest warmed at the presence of blood flowing freely to it, and he rose again from the ash-cradled earth, soil on his hands and his knees and the twin spheres of light on each end of the horizon.

If the wind sang, he could only halfway hear it. A moment ago, he had not been able to hear it at all. He took in a breath, felt the softened curves fall away to hardened edges. Spikes shifted and sprouted from the crown of his head, from his jawline, from his biceps and his knuckles and his spine. Small, but proud, marks of a time where they were needed. The weight of horns rested against his cheeks, horns that signified nothing more than a genetic aberration, than a family line still held in memory and hardened reinforcement against injury.

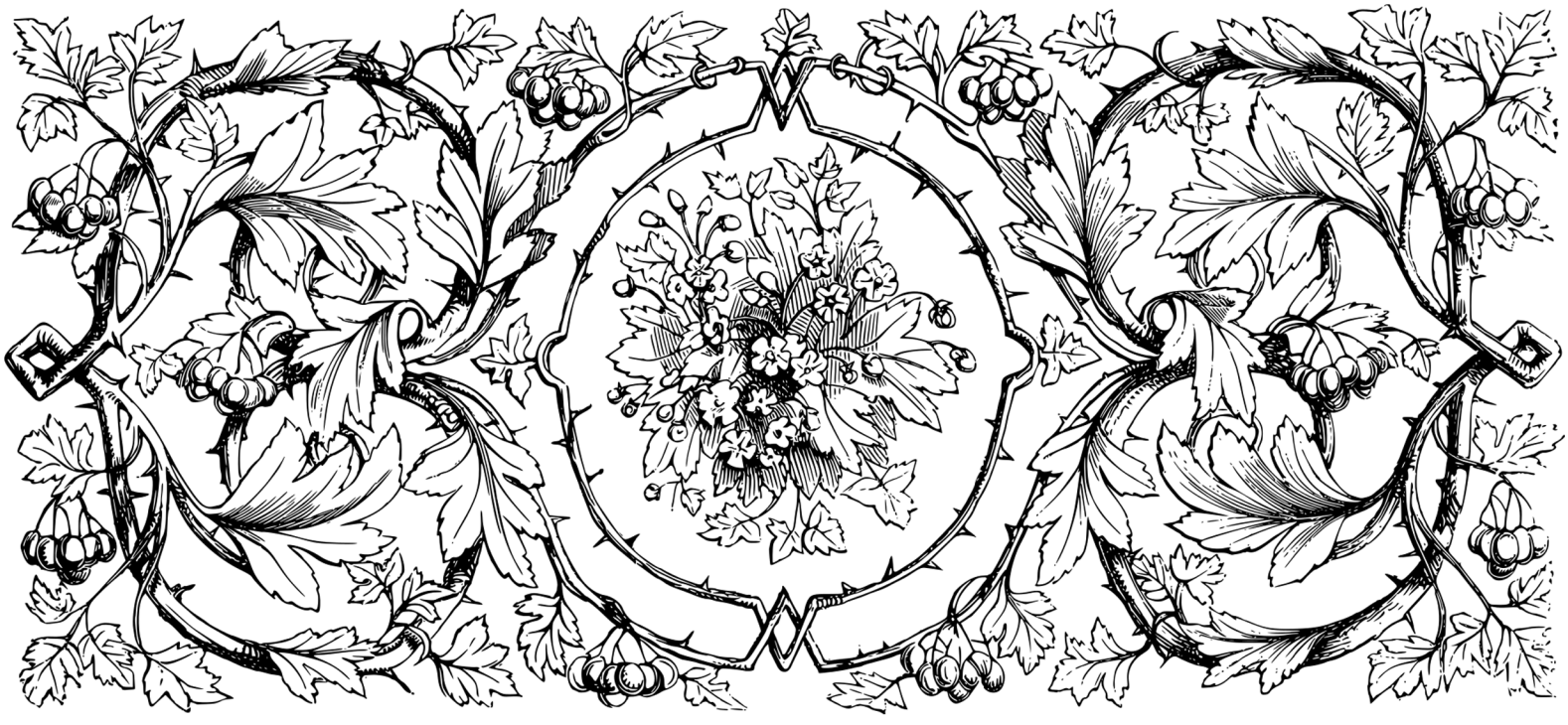
He blinked, and he could see the heat across the loam, redirected from the sky. The wind rustled the heath, brushing against his thighs. It had been hip-deep, before. He had knelt to the ground, and come up taller. Come up able to breathe the heath's gentle, windswept air. Come up able to hear the song of the wind.

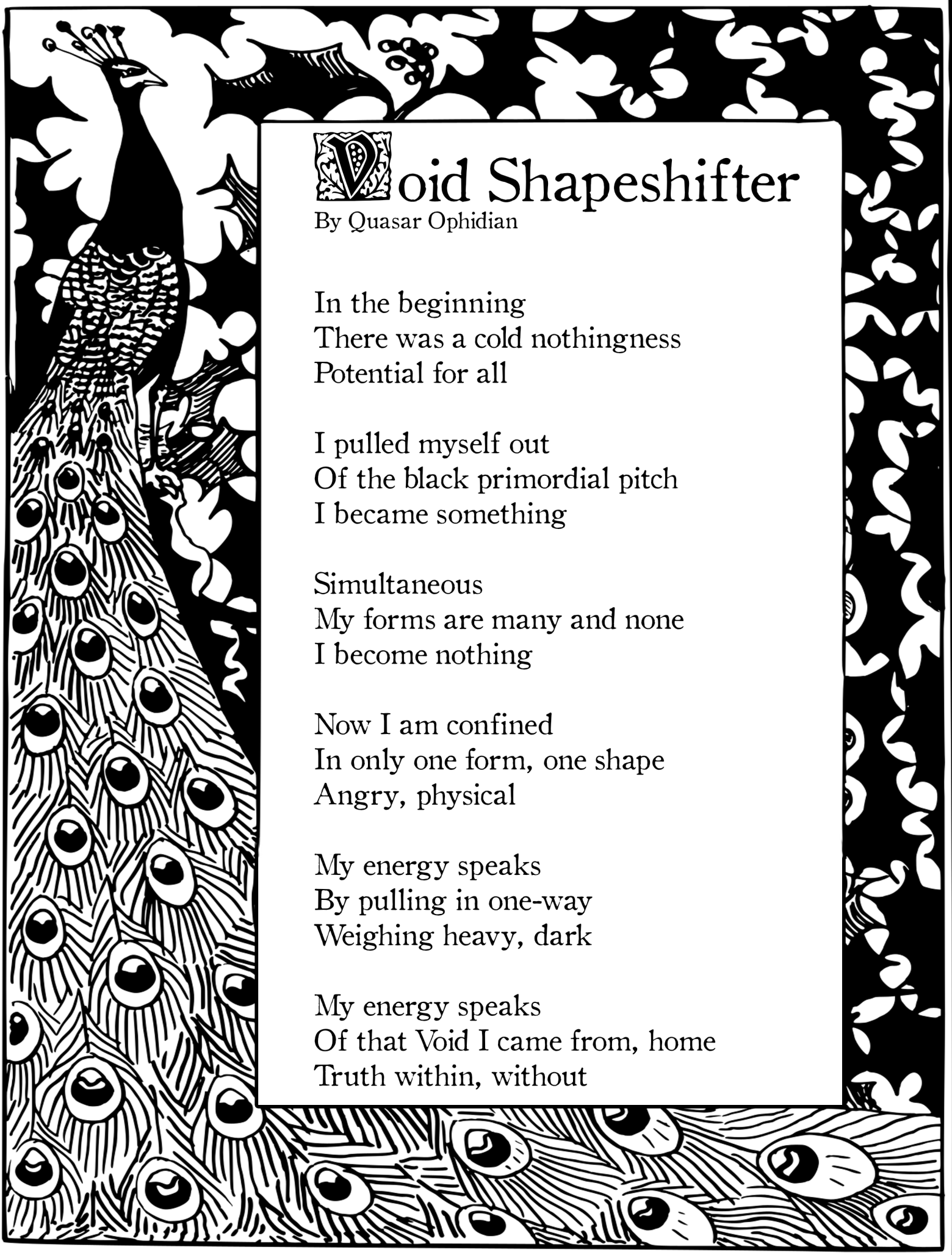
The twilight was brilliant. Half a second of blue light sweeping across the heather, half a second of a pretty, pale violet glow. For a brief, brilliant moment, the world was alight in orange alpenglow.

The sun rose across the east and the moon set in the west. The clouds hung only against the horizon, leaving a sphere of morning sky. He took in a breath, deep, wakening with the heavens, allowing the jewel of his once-buried heart to beat. The wind hummed, and he could hear it, and he knew it for the three syllables it was.

"Saverronne," it sang, howling in its harmony. For the first time, he could hear it. For the first time, he could recognize it.

It was his.





Void Shapeshifter

By Quasar Ophidian

In the beginning
There was a cold nothingness
Potential for all

I pulled myself out
Of the black primordial pitch
I became something

Simultaneous
My forms are many and none
I become nothing

Now I am confined
In only one form, one shape
Angry, physical

My energy speaks
By pulling in one-way
Weighing heavy, dark

My energy speaks
Of that Void I came from, home
Truth within, without

Whispers

By Page of the Sol System

She was hungry, again. She was always hungry, it seemed, no matter how often she pooled money she didn't have into a breakfast here, or a dinner there. Jessi found herself fiddling mindlessly with the cord of the blinds, opening them to squint into the early morning sunlight only to close them again. Rinse and repeat.

The room, not hers, was decorated modestly. A squashed dresser forced into a corner, two naked twin-sized mattresses lying side-by-side on the floor, a once-white half-moon rug. A creaky ceiling fan buzzed above, lights off. The walls were beige. The carpet was beige. The door, its handle turning and creaking open, was beige. If a home could have an aura, she knew what color this one's would be.

"Hey Jess?" A towel, like a conch shell spiraling upwards, poked through the doorway. The round, freckled face of Frank peered out underneath it. "You good? I'm gonna be heading out to BRU soon. Also, I need to change, so like…can I have a little privacy here?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Jessi said. Her stomach growled in disagreement, and she looked away in embarrassment as Frank raised an eyebrow at her. "I'll go while you get dressed. Sorry about that, I just wasn't thinking." She slipped past Frank, towards the living room.

The "living room" did not look like much living actually took place there. A rolled up futon and a laundry basket of toxic clothing were among its only decorations. A line of faded, frayed red cushions sat on empty milk crates that had been taped together and pushed against the wall. The couch was flat, sad, and uncomfortable. Jessi related. She didn't bother sitting down.

“Alright, I’m ready to head out,” Frank announced as he walked out of the previous room. The Hawaiian shirt he had chosen was black with blue flashes of lightning and bright yellow cobras decorating the front. Cherry blossoms speckled the dark background, matching Frank’s salmon boots. It was hideously perfect.

“Jesus christ,” said Jessi, desperately trying to avert her eyes from the train-wreck of cotton and buttons. “Are you going to put on weed socks and sandals too, while you’re at it? Maybe a nice pair of gym shorts and an edgy anime porn jacket?”

“No complaining if I’m driving us to school,” Frank said, keys twirling around his fingers. He fumbled, almost dropping them. “Plus, shorts and a jacket is a great look. You just have no taste,” he added, defensively.

“I have no taste? I think you should have one of the other psych majors check your brain,” Jessi said, following him out the door. Frank didn’t bother to lock it behind him and instead just steered them both towards his small silver car.

The car was parked crooked and as the two stepped out into the morning sun Jessi couldn’t help but smile at the rainbow flag that took up the car’s front window, shading the inside from the hot sun. That, she thought, was at least less tacky than--

Jessi was yanked down and backwards by her arm, searing pressure and pain. She yelled, dragged crashing to the cold sidewalk by a mix of dark fur and darker eyes.

Growls and bristling fur obscured her vision, its incisors and canines tearing at the flesh underneath her elbow, puncturing deeply and pulling her violently back and forth. She tried to pull back from it, punching blindly as tears obscured her vision. The mass of feral teeth growled louder. It sank its fangs deeper.

Frank didn't think. He just ran over and kicked, putting the full force of 3 years of college football behind his pink, steel-toed boots.

The dog--at least, Frank hoped it was a dog, it was awfully big to be a dog--let go with a loud yelp, launched into the air and away from its target. It growled, its ears bent back as Frank stomped towards it, puffing out his chest and putting his fists up.

"Fuck off! Go!" He yelled, kicking towards the animal wildly in some sort of demented dance. He waved his arms back and forth and kicked his legs out, howling and yelling as he rushed towards the canine. The dog growled, its beady black eyes glaring for a moment, before turning tail and running off through the bushes that lined the apartment complex's parking lot. Frank paused, checking to make sure it wasn't coming back, before turning to his friend.

Jessi was curled up around her arm, swearing loudly. There was blood everywhere--on her clothing, on her skin, on the sidewalk beneath her. Fuck, Jessi thought in a frozen panic, not fully comprehending what she was seeing. The dog had taken out a chunk of her arm, deep puncture wounds and tears surrounding the hole. It throbbed and screamed in agony, movement sending ripples of pain into the surrounding muscles. She was never going to get that stain out of her pants.

"Jessi? Jessi can you hear me?" Frank asked, quickly crouching in front of her. Jessi stared at him blankly. The world around her was vibrating like a seat on a roller coaster getting dragged uphill for a drop. She had heard him, but didn't have a clue what he was saying.

"This sucks," Jessi said. "How the hell am I supposed to pay for this?"

"You could always sell your body," Brad offered, tipping his snapback and winking. Everyone save Jerome glared at him, Jessi twisting around in her seat just so she could make sure he saw her own narrowed eyes. He raised his hands defensively. "Hey, I never claimed it was a good idea. Wait, are you not wearing a seatbelt?"

"If I die in an accident, I won't have to pay for any more rabies shots…or deal with my parents," she muttered, turning back to face the front of the car so she could more comfortably sulk. Jerome gave her as much of a side eye as he could while still keeping his eyes on the road, and Frank kicked the back of her seat.

"Please don't get me pulled over, Jess," Jerome said, scrunching his nose to readjust his glasses. "You know I'm bitch-ass broke."

"I wanna see you try to put on a seatbelt when your arm just got stitched back together!"

"It's a seatbelt! You have another hand!"

"Ladies, ladies," Brad interjected from the backseat. "You're both beautiful." Jerome flicked his eyes up to the rearview mirror.

"Don't, Patterson."

"Oooh, bringing out the last name, I'm so scared."

Jessi rolled her eyes at the couple's antics, cradling her right arm in her lap. Even after stitches, her arm still throbbed. She pulled the seatbelt over herself awkwardly, grimacing.

“So should we drop you off at school, or do you wanna just crash with us for the day? The turn’s coming up.” Frank asked from the back, legs crossed and fingers steepled in thought. He’d been quiet since the dog attack, staying with Jessi the entire time. Jessi sighed.

“My parents asked me to come home after everything that happened,” she said. “As much as I wanna just go home with you guys…”

“Say no more,” Jerome reassured her. “I know how your family can be, I’ve got you.” He took the upcoming turn. Jessi sunk back into the seat of the car, touching her stitches gently. That arm was burning now, like a gentler version of the liquid lava the doctors had injected into her earlier and claimed was just anesthetic. Jessi clenched her teeth and waited it out.



The house was nice enough, with white paint and a slanted roof that had most of its tiles. A line of bushes decorated the front, with planters of red lilies that decorated the path to the door. It would have been nearly picturesque if it wasn’t for the ragged, filthy man lurking in the middle of the front lawn.

As the car slowly rolled into the driveway, the man's head snapped up to watch it. He stood just past the front porch, limp cigarette in hand as his small, black eyes tracking the car's movement. A backpack twice his size loomed over him, casting his face and body in shadow.

"A friend of yours?" Jerome murmured, glancing at Jess. She shook her head slightly.

"Your first customer?" Brad asked from the back, grin tight on his face. Frank's face was dark.

"Let me walk you to the door," Frank said, his voice struggling to be neutral. "Please." Jessi felt herself shrink at the thought.

"You know my parents don't like you…"

"Extenuating circumstances," he said, already opening his door. Jerome nodded to Jessi, gesturing to the phone in his hand. 911 had already been typed onto the keypad, Jerome's thumb hovering over the call button. Jessi cringed at the thought of escalation, looking first at the man standing in front of her parent's home--her home, she reminded herself--and then back at the house itself. His eyes seemed to be borring into hers. She opened the car door, Frank waiting for her on the other side. Deep breaths, Jessi reminded herself. Meet him eye to eye.

She'd been on the streets for a time, after graduation. She'd elected not to pursue law like her family had always pushed her towards, instead opting to apply herself towards colleges with psychology programs. Bringing forth example after example of colleges that would have met her parent's stringent requirements, they rejected each and every one. Too small, too big, too private, too public, they'd claimed each and every time.

The process had finally ended when her mother, eyes flaming, had snarled at her that she could either make a proper living or starve on the streets like a rat if she wanted to pursue imaginary studies so badly. Jessi left as requested. She returned to her family and her destiny of law six months after, smaller than she'd been before.

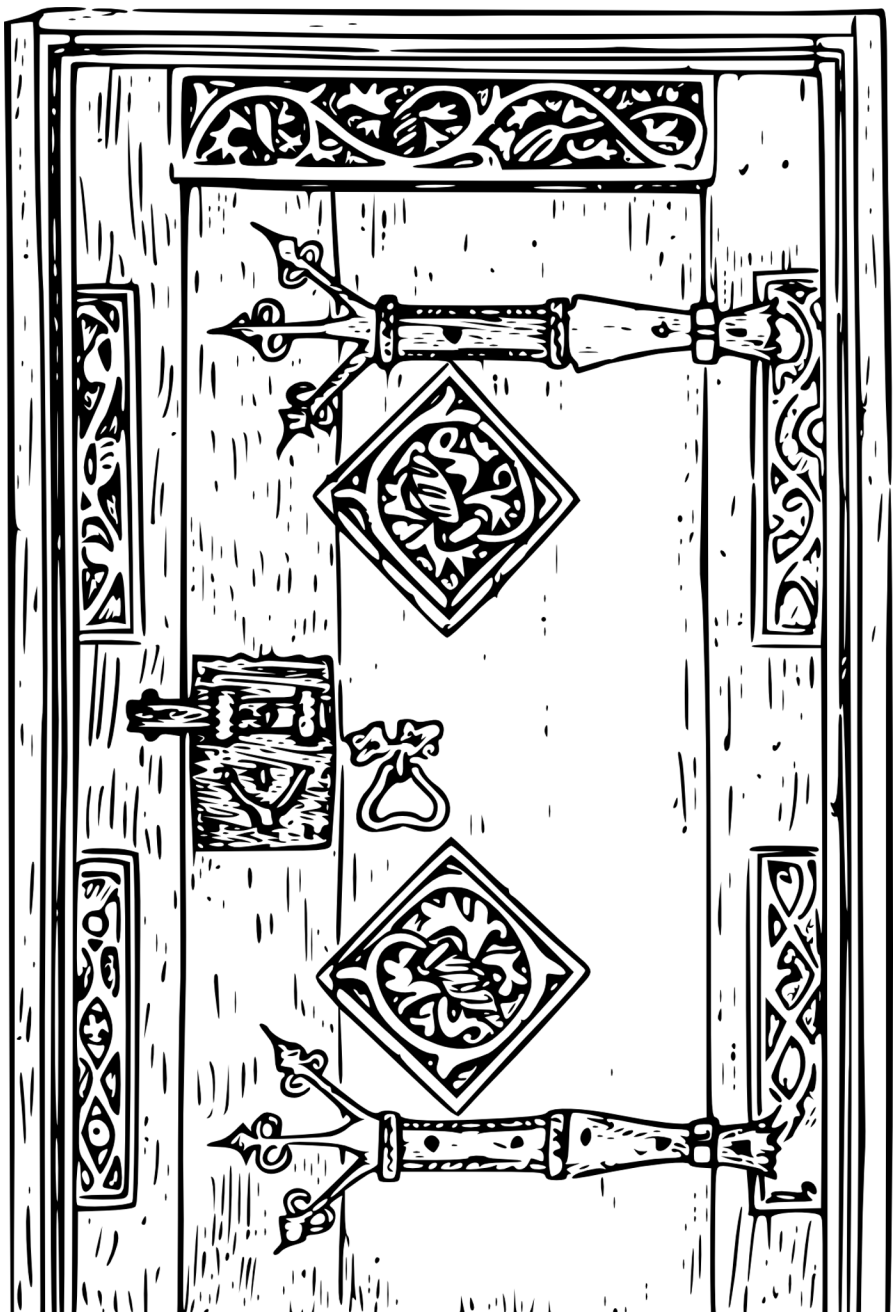
"Howdy there," Frank said to the man as they approached, voice light. The man watched Jessi as though she was the only person left on the planet. "Can we help you? Lost or broken down around here?"

"You need to go," the man said, ash drifting from the end of his cigarette into the grass. He was still staring at Jessi. Jessi met his eyes, taking in his black eyes and dark hair.

"I'm sorry?" Frank asked, a smile plastered on his face.

"You'll hurt them," the man said to Jessi, stepping forward unsteadily, his eyes still holding hers. "You won't be able to control it. I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. You'll listen, they always listen the first time. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry." The man reached out with his empty hand towards Jessi, wobbling forward more.





Frank took the opportunity as the stranger tilted his head in confusion to rush Jessi past, Frank's hand on the small of her back as he thrust her towards the door. She grabbed her keys from her khaki pockets, struggling to unlock the door as her hands shook.

"Sir, I'm sure I can help you with anything you need a hand with. You don't need to bother my friend, she-- he has had a long day," she heard Frank say behind her. Jessi glanced back, looking at the back of Frank's ridiculous hawaiian shirt as he stubbornly stood in-between her and the mysterious man. She managed to turn the lock, throwing herself inside and shutting the door behind her. Sorry Frank, she thought, even though she knew her friend would be perfectly fine. The man outside seemed more confused and lost than anything else-- but damn if the day hadn't had everyone on edge.

Jessi was greeted by the sight of her mother standing by the front window, peering through the closed blinds. She wore a plain pink shirt that hung loose on her wiry frame.

"Uh, I'm back from the hospital," Jessi said, hurrying to take off her shoes. The shiny leather reflected none of the dim light from the lamps scattered around the combination living room-parlor setup her family had arranged. She could hear a muffled conversation from behind the front door.

"Took you long enough," her mother said, still watching out the window. "You should have gotten an Uber."

"Sorry," Jessi mumbled, straightening her button-down nervously with her good hand. The talking outside had stopped. She could hear a car revving. No more unexpected hospital trips would be happening today, thankfully. "Would it be okay if I went and laid down? My arm hurts..." Jessi's relief was punctured by the look her mother gave her and her arm. Her mother let out a long-suffering sigh.

"You just had to go and hurt yourself, didn't you? Now we all have to pay for it." Jessi felt herself bristling at her mother's rebuke. I didn't want to get attacked by a dog! Jessi thought, shoving her hands into her pockets. Her arm still burned, the feeling having creeped up into her chest. "Just lay down on the couch when you watch your brothers, you'll be fine. Young men like you can walk off anything."

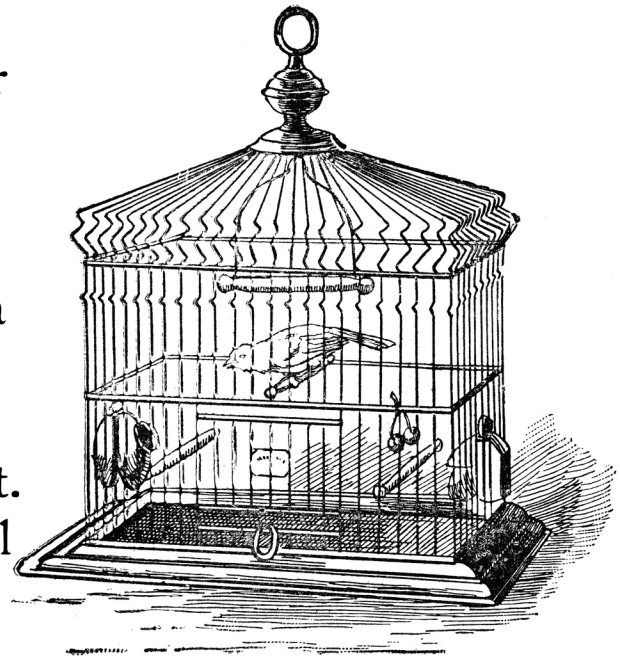
Jessi trudged to the designated play room of the house, a small bedroom that had been converted into a childproof area, filled with broken toys and dirty cups. A small television sat on a table against the back wall, with four children of varying sizes staring up at it from the floor as a small raccoon danced on-screen.

"Keith!" The youngest said, turning around and waving his arms, which were still chubby from baby fat. He smiled wide, revealing a huge gap where his front two teeth should have been. Poor Charlie, Jessi thought. He'd ran straight into a light post and knocked them out a week earlier. When everyone asked why he'd done it, he just cried.

"Hey kiddo," Jessi said, flopping onto the small loveseat opposite the television. It was scratchy and far too small for someone over six feet tall, but Jessi tried to make herself comfortable as she laid down across it. "The tooth fairy give you money last night?"

"She sure did!" Charlie pointed at the gap for emphasis. Jessi couldn't help but give him a small smile at that.

"Good, otherwise me and her would've had a ew words, you know?" She flexed her good arm from her awkward position on the l oveseat, much to the younger sibling's delight. Jessi closed her eyes, laying back. "Hey, y'all mind keeping an eye on stuff for a bit?"



“Mhm,” the oldest of the small floor-sitting group said. He was a gangly twelve-year-old, at that awkward preteen age where he should have been allowed to wallow in his room. He was too old to be confined to a smelly, kid-proofed cave with children half his age, Jessi thought sympathetically. Her mind flicked back to the frustration she’d felt at his age, of being caged like a wild animal. She hoped his teenage years would be better than hers.

“Thanks,” Jessi said. Half her torso was on fire now, the burning sensation spreading tendrils out from where she had been bitten. She almost wanted it to be infected. Head and feet hanging off the loveseat, Jessi fell into a fitful sleep.



When she woke up, Jessi’s entire body was on fire and the room was dark. Her head and vision was swimming as she cracked open an eye. She lurched upright, blearily glancing around. It was night now, the curtains drawn, lights off, and door closed. Even despite that, Jessi could see everything and, worse, smell everything. She instinctively reached up to smother her snout, but her body jerked violently, her everything feeling like a spring wound too tight.

She could hear a low roar in her head, someone whispering in the background for her to get up, to go. Her ears swiveled. She could hear her family in the nearby dining room, forks and knives clinking against the plates as though she were right next to them.

"He was with those fags again," she could hear her mother's sickly high-pitched voice, no doubt addressed to her father. "In front of the children! You've got to do something about his behavior. What if they make him..." She could hear the weight of what wasn't said.

"He's not gay," her father responded, trying to alleviate her mother's worries. She could picture him, scratching his beard as he thought. He's not technically wrong, she thought through the haze. "He'll settle down soon enough." A chair scratched as someone got up. Jessi did as well, knocking the loveseat back against the wall as she stood. Head still woozy, still spinning, she stumbled her way through the room--it seemed so much smaller now, a voice behind the whispers noted--pulling herself towards the door. She wrapped her clawed hand around the doorknob, breathing hard between her teeth. The brass was cool to the touch against her fur. Jessi didn't notice.

"I won't have any son of ours a fucking queer," Jessi's mother's voice was shrill, and Jessi found herself baring her teeth and throwing the door wide open. The noise that came out of her mouth was hardly human as she hunched her shoulders and lurched down the hallway, her claws leaving long scratch marks on the drywall as she threw herself forward recklessly. Her brain was insisting on movement, towards the light and the talk and the food. The whispers were louder, demanding things that she didn't want to hear. Jessi was starving, hungrier than she'd ever been before in her life.

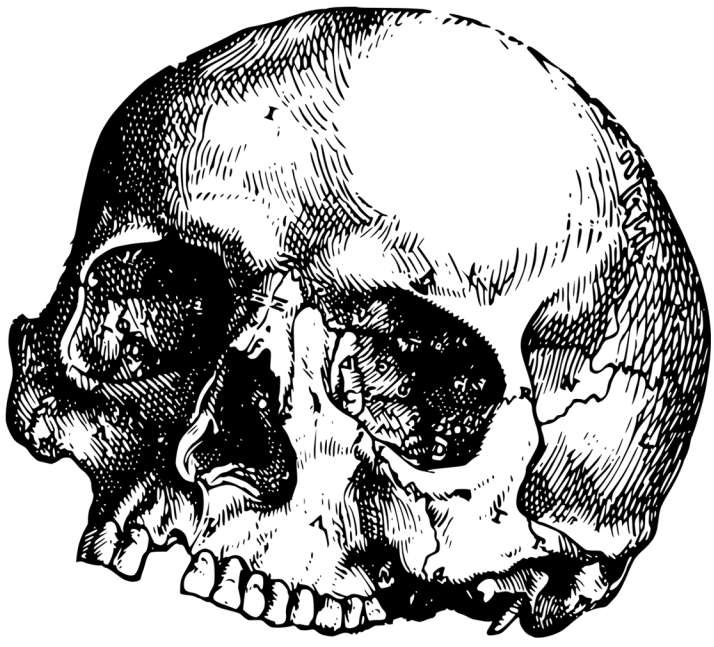
She burst into the light and everything burst into screams.

Her mother flailed violently, eyes bugging out from her skull as her chair fell backwards to the ground, and screamed, "MONSTER!" Her father instinctively stood upright in shock, Jessi's new body looming above him. One of her siblings yelled something as the four scattered, each child for themself as they fled. Jessi snarled at the pathetic remaining humans, beyond thinking. Her father groped for his steak knife, stepping back as he held it up.

The armed one, the whispers insisted, grabbing her heart and squeezing at the challenge. Her body was buzzing with energy and hunger. She met her father's eyes. She could smell his fear. His blood. Her ears tilted back as she bared her teeth in a savage smile. Kill, the voices whispered. Maim. Rend.

She was speed and power and claws and fangs. He was soft, much softer than she expected when she launched into him, grabbing him by his raised arm and throwing them both through the glass door beyond the table. The glass crunched brilliantly beneath them. Jessi barely felt it. Her father screamed, punching her face desperately as she dragged him outside. Her muzzle, wrapped around his arm, bit deeper as she swung him back and forth. She was going to shred him, bit by bit. The whispers hummed in her bones, rising with his screams. Her father's arm was torn from its socket when she slammed him into the ground one last time.

He looked up at her, his face drenched in tears as she loomed above him. She took his head tenderly into her mouth. He whimpered at the black maw in front of him, at the void that lay there. A part of her wanted to comfort him. A part of her didn't care. She snapped her jaws shut.



There was a horrible crunch and his body spasmed underneath her as she pierced his skullcap, a sick gurgle coming forth before the man slumped down, his brown eyes locked wide in horror.

Jessi drew back, panting. Her father, no longer held up by her jaws of steel, crumbled to the ground in a miserable heap. She looked at him. The steak knife was still clenched in his hand.

A bang erupted from behind her and she stumbled forward, unwilling. Almost tripping over the corpse, she clutched her side. It ached and throbbed like a kick, and the pads of her clawed hands came back slick and red.

"Get out! Demon!" Her mother howled from behind Jessi. Her thin, pale hands shook as she aimed the bedside Glock, firing again. The bullet ate into the dirt in front of Jessi. Jessi growled, backing up slowly. She met her mother's eyes, glaring for a brief second as the whispers surged in her once more, demanding to be sated, for more blood to be spilled. But Jessi turned tail and ran, disappearing as she rushed behind the side of the house. She kept running, past the bushes that lined the house and the road leading up to it. She ran across dim-lit streets, honked at by terrified drivers, and underneath raging highways.

When she finally stopped, the sun was rising. Her clothing and skin were stained with blood and the creases of her hands reeked of pennies. She swayed in front of a beige door drunkenly, grabbing the handle and opening it to an empty living room. Home, her instincts sang underneath the weight of exhaustion and horror. The apartment was quiet. She stumbled past a rolled up futon, past the toxic-smelling laundry basket, to the milk crates, still taped together with their sad, red cushions. Burying her now-human face into the flat pillows, Jessi laid down and cried.



Contributors

Scar
Scarsmood.tumblr.com

Kisota
Silver-Sundog.deviantart.com

Ey'teneh-Onik

Silver & Rain of The Dragonheart Collective
DragonsRoost.neocities.org

Zavegonzo

Pale M. L. Greenwood
Shadowfae.neocities.org

House of Chimeras
HouseofChimeras.neocities.org

Sya
Multiverse-Sya.tumblr.com

Synanthrope
Synanthropic.tumblr.com

Theo
WilderWilderness.tumblr.com

Kara
Karaspookdog.tumblr.com

Quasar Ophidian
QuasarOphidian.wordpress.com

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A big thank you to Orion Scribner, who supplied an absolute bounty of royalty-free images for use in this project.

Many images utilized in this project, when not from the resources gifted by Orion, were from Pixabay and the Florida Center for Instructional Technology (specifically from https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/). These collections were invaluable for designing this zine.

This project was inspired by Tsu Swanblood's The Forest Voice zine.

Postface

Creation is what defines community. The stories we write today are what the people of tomorrow will tear through to find hope, inspiration, and kinship (no pun intended). This zine is an attempt to help foster that for the nonhuman and alterhuman communities in a period of time where it is so terrifyingly easy to lose whole swathes of our history and culture to 404 errors and a digital oblivion.

I hope that the stories within this small zine may continue to inspire others to write and create in relation to their own experiences. Never stop leaving tracks and trails; it's proof of a life well-lived and well-loved!

Yours in kin and claws,
Page Shepard